Deep Magic

July 2005

The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction

Published by Amberlin

Issue 38

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July 2005

As we kick off the July issue of Deep Magic, we wanted to give you an update on our membership drive. So far, so good—we have begun paying authors and artists for their work to appear in Deep Magic, and the change in our guidelines has turned a trickle of submissions into an online flood. Our staff is working furiously around the clock to read through these new submissions, and we hope you will see, as we have, an increase in the quality of stories each month. We have not received enough memberships to fund Deep Magic for a full year, however, so we would appreciate your support and involvement.

This month we have some delightful stories for your consumption. Sean T.M. Stiennon brings us back to the world of Jalazar Flinteye with *Flinteye's Duel*. Then we visit a futuristic fantasy world experiencing the traumas of an extended war in *Divining Borders*. And finally, L.S. King offers a story of a strong-willed clan in *Alternate Path*, a story that began as a humble writing challenge. We also continue the novel *Shadowloom* this month.

Now that we have a new staff member dedicated to hunting down fantastic artwork, we will also be providing more opportunities for artists around the world. Our cover artist this month is Kerem Beyit from Turkey. We loved his work "Mushroom Hill" and others. We also profile another fantastic artist, Christian Scheurer, in an interior layout.

We would also like to announce a special Writing Challenge this month. We won't reveal any secrets here, but we will mention that our challenge this month involves a cash prize and that it gives you a sneak peek at a future Deep Magic cover. Read on ahead to learn more.

Our weekend at the Opus convention was a great way of meeting new authors who are eager to participate in Deep Magic. This month's issue features an interview with Barb and JC Hendee, authors of the world of the Noble Dead. An interview with Sean T. M. Stiennon, whose *Six with Flinteye* was recently published, is also included. Deep Magic co-founder Brendon Taylor also offers an informative writing craft article about creating good physical descriptions in your stories.

An action-packed issue, for certain. We are also dipping our toes into other multimedia realms. Be sure to catch our first commercial, introducing the universe of *Procyx* (you need Quicktime 7.0 to view it properly) here.

Finally, we would like to put out a call for a future Deep Magic issue. Every October, we like to offer stories with a bit of a scare to them, so we encourage all you authors to submit some good October-worthy stories. Be sure to keep them clean, of course, but don't be afraid to frighten us a bit.

Until next month,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication.

To submit a challenge, go to our new online submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date below.

Selections from the May 2005 Challenge

End Of the Line
Ether
Life After Life
Spirit Walk
The Golden Eternity

The above stories were selected from the May challenge, which was to write a scene or short story delving into a fantasy afterlife.

Don't forget the June challenge due July 10:

This month's writing challenge is inspired by Gail Dayton's article on emotion in this month's issue. Emotion is what draws a reader into the story and what gets them attached to your characters. The trick is conveying the proper amount of emotion without overdoing it or leaving the reader with no attachment. Emotion can be conveyed through words, actions, body language, and more. Read Gail Dayton's article, then write a short scene involving one or more characters. Pick an emotion you want to convey to the reader, then bring it out through the characters' words, actions, mannerisms, or a combination of the three.

Keep your submissions for this challenge to 500 words.

July 2005 Writing Challenge Entries due August 10, 2005

This month we have a special challenge for our loyal readers/writers. Thanks to a gracious donation from Deep Magic staff member Mike Loos, the writing challenge is also a contest with a cash prize of $25.00. With this extra added incentive, we are asking a little more from you this month. Our challenge is a hybrid of previous challenges and article topics and will be stretched over two months. The subject of your assignment is the cover image for the September issue, which you can preview by clicking here. Your challenge is to use that image as inspiration for the beginning of a story. Write up to the first 1,500 words of your story in such a way that your readers will be hooked to read the second half. Whether you succeed or not in building sufficient tension, drama, and interest will, in fact, depend on a vote from the readers.

We will set up a poll in our forums for readers to vote from September first through the twentieth regarding which stories shall be published in full in the October issue. So, be ready with "the rest of the story." Total story length shall be under 5,000 words. Feel free to submit the entire story by August 10, 2005, or you may submit only the first portion (up to 1,500 words). If you submit the full story, please mark the break between your writing challenge entry and the rest of the story. If you only submit the first portion of the story, make sure you have the second half of the story ready for submission by September 1, 2005, for it to be included in the October issue. If we do not receive it by then, you will be out of the contest and subject to ridicule on the forums.

The winner of the $25.00 prize will be determined by a vote of the readers and staff at the end of the contest. All editors and Deep Magic staff are ineligible to enter the contest. However, we are not to be left out of the fun. The editors have been invited, encouraged and cajoled into participating in the challenge in a separate class. Their entries will be published and put to the vote in a separate category. The personal challenges are being levied and the gloves are coming off behind the scenes at Deep Magic, so help us decide which staff member is entitled to the bragging rights.

Good luck to all!

End Of the Line

By A.M. Stickel

His body having outlived its usefulness to his liege lord, Spymaster Smyth's spirit watched his head tumble from his shoulders. The severed head's eyes stared up at Lord Roald's executioner, Uldo the Axman, who did not notice Smyth's soul, head intact, resting lighter than a butterfly upon his own broad back. Neither did the cheering rabble gathered in Galad Square.

Next, Smyth felt a persistent tug upon his spirit leg. A hideous gray-hooded figure with armored skin hovered in the air beside him, its clawed hand clamping down in a most uncomfortable manner.

"Did you really think you had left pain behind you?" rasped the figure.

"I was a loyal servant, wrongfully executed," replied Smyth.

"So say they all," said his tormentor, clamping down harder and dragging Smyth toward the mouth of a long, dark tunnel that had begun to form behind them. The red-eyed monster flashed sharp fangs in a scaly gray face; his unwholesome gaze promised worse to come. He dipped his head in mock politeness, and pounded his other hand upon his armored chest.

"I am the Demon Maleficor, your personal escort to the End of the Line. Please feel free to keep begging and groveling. I enjoy *my* job."

"I can beg and grovel with the best of them, since I've had a lifetime of practice under Roald's thumb. And look where it got me." whined Smyth.

Maleficor wrapped his hand around Smyth's throat and throttled him with his barbed tail, "Begging, groveling, and even cursing I can stand, but I draw the line at whining. It's too close to praying, something you never bothered with in life."

"I was busy serving. Paradise is promised for faithful service, which I gave." Smyth noticed that every time he spoke with Maleficor the darkness and suffocating heat around them strengthened, the demon's eyes glowed brighter, and his sulfurous odor increased.

"Service! If that were true, then I'd be cavorting in Paradise myself, instead of being here in the cold with the likes of you," sneered Maleficor. "Besides, Paradise is but a false rumor meant to lure mankind into slavery. Make no mistake, human. All beings end in The Pits."

"I don't suppose you'd consider taking early retirement?" said Smyth, who did not feel cold so much as if he were being slowly roasted over hot coals.

"Your kind has often made me feel like handing in my resignation," admitted Maleficor. "But then I reflect upon how much more boring my existence might become cracking a whip in The Pits."

A terrible roaring surrounded the pair, but Maleficor's voice rose above the din as he leered into Smyth's face amid the flames and proclaimed, "And speaking of The Pits, we have arrived..."

According to Lord Roald's orders, his Chief Magus had retrieved Spymaster Smyth's severed head and performed an elaborate forbidden ritual. Finally, he bowed before purple-clad, gold-crowned Roald and bade him, "Master, ask him your question. He is ready to answer."

After the magus discreetly departed, noble Roald, a tall and robust man, approached the head, set at eye-level upon a crystal dais within the inner chamber's spiral pattern. He softly

invoked his servant's spirit, "Smyth, you were ever steady in my service throughout life. I am sorry that in order to send you on your final mission it was necessary to sever the thread of your life. But, had you known its purpose, I am sure your mission would have been impossible. I have one question."

"Ask your question, mortal, and receive the answer you deserve," replied the dead man's disembodied voice. His ghastly lips, however, did not move.

"Does Paradise exist?" Roald's face shone with eager anticipation; for this answer and this alone had he ordered an innocent man beheaded.

At that instant, Maleficor's grip on Smyth's soul loosened. The demon, who felt Smyth slip away, hurled his pitchfork. Smyth's escape allowed him but one glance below, where he beheld Roald's spirit, transfixed by the pitchfork. Among those entering The Pits, his former master's shriveled soul, wailing and gnashing its teeth, had taken Smyth's place at the End of the Line.

Ether

By Tshinta Grace

I've always wanted to fly. Soaring through the air, feeling the slipstream tug at my feet, looking down upon people—it has always been alluring to me.

My father said Air is in my blood, but I never asked him what that means. He was a strange person, secretive and cryptic. They say I took after him in looks, dark hair, blue eyes, and pale skin. That's the typical Raitoken appearance.

Now, I'll never get the chance to ask my father what he meant. I'll never get the chance to find out who I am, and where I came from.

He is dead. My beloved father died as he wished, died by his own sword. My brothers followed him into death, dying by their swords in turn.

I couldn't do that. I could not put myself to my sword, could not slice my sword across my throat. It was not cowardice. I swore I would follow them into death.

But I won't die by the sword.

Even now, I stand on the very edge of the Tiakin cliffs, waiting for the right moment to die. When is the right moment, and how do I know that it is *the* right moment?

I look down at my hands. I am holding a bundle of seven swords. They belonged to my brothers, and my father.

I untie the rope holding them together. One by one, I unsheathe them, and let myself touch the edge to my wrist, nicking the skin slightly.

Then I set them down beside me, keeping one in my hand.

My father's sword. I take a deep breath, and throw it over the cliff. It falls. Shinji's sword follows, and then Akuma's.

I beg Dweva to let them dwell in peace together. The Lord of Death does not answer my prayers. I didn't expect him to.

Finally, I have come to the end of the swords… or have I?

My hands are shaking, as I unsheathe the last sword. My sword.
I slice it across my wrist. The pain is familiar, now.
Then I hurl it over the edge, and throw myself after it.
I am flying at last.

The ground is a green expanse, racing upwards to embrace me. I laugh, and the wind snatches my laughter from me. It snatches my tears from me. I turn over in midair, and laugh again. Flying is ecstasy.
I will meet my family in death.

It hurts as I hit the ground. There is a thump and I bounce several times. I lie there, with every bone in my body shattered. Dweva will soon come for me. But he has to tend to every other person who died seconds before me first, so I may have a long wait.
I stare up into the sky, awaiting the dark phoenix that will soon come to take me into a new world.
There is a dark speck. I blink painfully, thinking Dweva is coming.
Then another speck appears, and another.
I count them silently.
There are eight altogether.
One by one, each of the swords falls to the ground like a deadly projectile.
One by one, each of the swords buries itself in my broken body.
How ironic to die this way. I gave my family a taste of my death, and now, I am getting a taste of their own deaths.
The world is slowly fading. Not to black, but to grey. My father's sword stabbed me through the throat. Raitoken are built of strong stuff. It… takes… a lot to… kill… one of us…

* * *

Cold, wet mist touches my face.
That is wrong. My spirit is meant to be cleansed by the gentle fires of death, before I ascend to the wonders of the Spirit Realm.
I open my eyes.
Grey fog is above me.
I roll over.
Grey fog is below me…
Wait.
I… moved?
I can feel tears rolling down my cold face.
I am alive! Why am I alive?
I sit up gingerly. There is no pain.
I look at my hands. They have a silvery tinge to them, but other than that, they are whole.
'I want to die,' I cry out. 'I want to be with my family!'
'But you are.'
I leap into the air in fright. Someone is here with me?
A woman walks out of the fog. I take a good look at her. Long silver-white hair, white clothes, white skin, and even silver eyes! She must be a spirit! I have died after all!

'Where am I? Am I in death?'

She does not answer, but underneath me, the fog parts.

Calmly, I look down. I see a city, and below that, green fields.

My heart lurches. It is Tiakin city. I can recognise the palace near the cliffs.

'I'm not dead, am I?'

There is a slow, gradual shift, and this strange cloud, for cloud it must be, travels down the cliff. I flinch, seeing my broken, impaled body.

The cloud closes around me.

'This is… death?'

'No. This is your home.'

I stare at her.

'My home is with my family! Let me die in peace!'

'You cannot die.'

My hopes plummet to the earth, just as I did.

'What?' I gasp, unable to believe my ears.

'He never told you?' The woman seems surprised.

'Told me what? Am I supposed to know something?' I ask, jumbling my words together.

'You are not a full blood Raitoken. You are half elemental.'

I swallow, feeling tears prick my eyes.

I understand what my father meant now.

Air is in my blood. Air is my mother.

'Haven't you ever wondered about your name, *Ether?*'

With the sound of my name echoing in my ears, I awaken as an elemental. The blood in my veins is replaced by air. I unravel, and dissolve to become the ether in the sky, the upper regions of air.

I am doomed to an immortal life chasing clouds, separated forever from my family.

Life After Life

By Aline de Chevingy

Sam cursed. "You have got to be kidding me!"

"No, Samantha, I'm not, you died twenty minutes ago at Saviors of Mercy."

"But he said it was routine and the worst that would happen was I'd have a larger scar."

"He was wrong; he waited too long to operate."

Sam glared; some Guardian Angel she ended up with. He stood there, looking sheepish wearing his scuffed cowboy boots, tired Stetson, black tee and tight-fitting jeans held up by the largest, shiniest silver buckle she'd ever seen. Normally she'd sit back and enjoy the view; today she was pissed. Not to mention dead.

"Where were you, the Rodeo? You, buddy, are supposed to be my Guardian Angel!"

"Yes, I am."

"Don't you mean yes, you were?"

"No, I am! At least until I get you to your afterlife."

Sam looked him over; "Maybe I should ask someone else to escort me there. I mean you haven't exactly done a bang up job so far."

"Now that's a little unfair, don't you think?"

Disgusted, Sam turned and walked away. After a few moments she realized that she hadn't gone anywhere and her Guardian Angel still stood two feet in front of her. His ocean-blue eyes twinkled with mischief while he grinned at her. Crossing her arms she glared at him.

"Why can't I leave?"

"You haven't chosen a destination yet."

"Okay, Cowboy, what are my options here?"

"What do you want? And please, Samantha, call me Austin."

Sam snorted at him. "Austin?"

Seeing his frown, she threw up her hands in self defense. "Okay, okay, sorry. So my life wasn't perfect, but I liked it and I want it back."

"Wish I could, darlin'."

"Then what else is there?"

"You could start over, rejoin the pool."

"Reincarnation? You mean do the baby thing again, risk getting stuck in a worse place that I just left? No way. Forget it."

"But you just said…"

"Yeah, my ADULT life wasn't bad. The childhood thing was hell on earth and I'm not doing it again."

"How about another level of the wheel?"

"Are you suggesting I should go down the evolution chart or up?"

"I could see you as a feisty mare, pampered by her Cowboy."

Sam glared at him, "You'd have sores on your backside that would never heal."

She watched as Austin threw back his head and laughed at her sally. "How about entering the Elysian Fields?"

She watched him wave his hand over a section of the white wall where a window appeared. Looking inside, she watched as people lounged about laughing and talking. The world looked green and soothing. Not exactly interesting or intriguing in her mind.

"No thanks, it looks awfully dull down there."

She could feel Austin's eyes on her, as he weighed and measured her. "Then how about Atlantis?"

"Atlantis? Do I look like a fish to you?"

"Look before you decide." He motioned to another section of white wall space.

Sam looked in. She saw regally dressed couples walking around, nodding formally to one another, and shuddered. Too structured, too polished. She wanted fun, not strict rules of conduct.

She looked at Austin mischievously. "How about your world?"

"Mine?"

"Yeah, I could do the whole Guardian Angel thing, and I know who I would want to watch over."

She'd intrigued him. "Tell me who would you guard over, Samantha?"

"Wanna-be writers. They could use a Guardian Angel to watch over them. Someone to whisper encouragements when they falter. Someone to nudge them when it's needed. Someone to put ethereal arms around them in comfort when they get their first rejection."

"You can't force anyone to listen to you. It's not as easy as it seems."

"You think, Cowboy?"

"Listen, Samantha, I'm sorry about not being there. It was your time. I wasn't allowed to interfere, only be here for you when you arrived."

"Looking like that?"

"One of the rules, that we bent for you."

"Rules? What rules?"

"Well, I passed on at a Rodeo. So I go through my afterlife wearing what I had on when I died."

Sam narrowed her eyes at him, "Forget it, Austin, I am not going through my afterlife in a hospital gown."

His grin made her want to punch him. "What?"

"You weren't wearing the gown during the operation. So…" He continued quickly before she could scream at him. "I chose your favorite outfit from life, exactly what you're wearing right now."

"Thanks."

"I'll go submit your petition; you think about alternatives in case they say no."

Sam sat there looking around. She couldn't tell how big or small the room was or if it even ended. So she decided to take Austin's advice and try to choose an alternative. As she walked through the hall, windows would open as she passed, giving her a glimpse of other afterlives.

Some were hot and tropical, some looked like party central. One even looked like a nunnery. A shiver ran through her at the thought. But in the end she couldn't choose; she wanted to do something with her afterlife, not fade away.

Austin returned hours later. She thought it was hours later, but in here she couldn't tell. "So tell me, what did they say?"

Austin grinned at her and nodded towards the door that had appeared next to him.

* * *

"I can't do this, guys, my writing sucks tonight."

"No it doesn't, you're just tired. Put it aside and try working on it tomorrow."

"No I think I….."

'Don't even think about it, young Lady, I know you have talent and you will finish that chapter tonight even if I have to nag at you until it's done.' Sam whispered into her charge's ear.

Sam watched as her charge smiled and bent back down to continue writing. "I love this job."

"I knew you would." Austin told her with a grin. "You died for this."

Spirit Walk

By Auren Faire

Death walked tonight. Alone again. I watched from an outcropping as she walked the green fields of the most recent battle. Another meaningless glory with meaningless reasons. Her face was stoic against the night and as the wind teased her violet hair...

"Grimoor!" The shout from across the field startled the imp. "Will you stop with the blasted narrative? I can't concentrate when you get like that." Death was not pleased, and Grimoor sighed. Good prose was wasted on the youth of today. He snorted.

With a grunt he jumped down from his perch. His tricky knee gave him a check before he sprinted toward his Mistress. It was going to be a long night. They were behind schedule again, and Hades liked to run an efficient routing system. Souls had to travel the expressways to the afterlife. There they'd get a recharge and, if they so chose, wash back into the world as an infant. The imp checked the time by the night. A train of new souls already on the way, they needed to get a move on.

"Grimoor, I need your help here." Grimoor slowed as he eyed his Mistress warily. The wind blew her black velvet cloak from her body, showing the shimmer of her black tunic of office. Black boots, black leggings, black hair clasp. Almost dark enough to be THE Grim, but she couldn't quite pull it off. He chuckled to himself.

Her face was cute. Not eerie, gorgeous, or frightening. Pale and cute. Like a pixie cute. So, when souls wanted to bargain for their lives, they never took her seriously. And, noting the argument Death was having with a newly acquired soul, he figured it had happened again.

'Poor girl.' His Mistress had a hard enough time as it was. An old man, stooped in age lay dying at her feet, curled into the fetal position. She wasn't arguing with the man, however, but with his soul. His soul was one of a young man, still attached to his body by a thin thread. Grimoor moved to the old man, attempting to make him more comfortable. "There, old father, rest easy now." The labored breathing eased even as his soul battled with Death.

"I need to search for something. It's vital." His spirit cried to Death in agony.

"What do I care for man and his needs. I have a job, Spirit Walker. Can you deny my right to your soul?" Death put her hands on her hips. It looked entirely too sassy to be a proper stance for Death. Not proper at all. He snickered.

Arcs of spirit fire leapt from the young man.

"You have no idea what I need!" He shook a fist in anger. "I have to find something before I die!" Shakily he combed through his hair with his fingers. "You cannot deny me this request!"

Death pushed up to him, her forehead barely reaching his chin. She shot a glare to Grimoor before he could chuckle. Poking the soul in the chest had the young man starting in surprise. "Look, I don't have time for your dramatics. If you need to know the end of the war, I can tell you. If you need to get some information to your commander, I'll pass it in his dreams."

The soul laughed, crossing his arms over his chest. Death looked surprised. "Does it look like I am in any kind of military?" His hand gestured toward the ancient body of the dying man. "I have no interest in this battle, or the war. I only need to find something." His face sobered. "There is a promise I made, and I have to get something before I pass into the afterlife." Suddenly his eyes filled with terrible sadness. "Please, Death. I'll not fight you; just give me

until dawn."

Death tilted her head in consideration. She looked to Grimoor. "Come." Grimoor clambered up her body to rest on her shoulder. "Til dawn, Spirit Walker. Let us go."

The soul slipped back into the old body. Death leaned down to help him stand. "Young at heart are you, old father?" A wheezy chuckle was her only response as he began to move toward Grimoor's earlier outcropping. Grimoor hung onto Death's shoulder using her hair for balance. She grunted something about being a tow truck. He snickered.

"Ahh, here it is." The old father's voice sounded husky. His weathered hands tried to pull the stones away.

"Grimoor." Death held out her arm for him to crawl down. The old father pointed and Grimoor made quick work of the excavation. Buried behind a stone was an old cloth. When Grimoor handed it to him, the old father's hand shook. He unwrapped it, leaving two gold wedding bands, one large, one small, glinting in his hand.

The old father grinned a toothy grin and sighed. "There, dear Sharon. I can come to you now." He slipped the large ring on his ring finger, and slipped the smaller one over his pinky. His soul began to shimmer in separation.

Death watched his soul step from the body of the old father. Her face was a mask of sorrow. "Peace in your afterlife, Spirit Walker. I hope you find your happiness."

"I thank you, patient Death. As well as you..." His soul shifted in discomfort. "What do I call you?" Grimoor grinned heartily.

"Grimoor, the imp, at your service." He bowed sketchily. "Mischief-maker, bard, sexy demifey, and sense of humor to Mistress Death." Mistress Death pegged the 'sense of humor' in the face with her balled up cloak. The soul laughed as he faded to the afterlife.

Death stalked away as Grimoor struggled from under the voluminous folds of the cloak. He began to narrate at her tense back.

Death stalked the night. Alone nevermore. Her sense of humor stalked behind her, lying in wait to pounce. Determined to crack a smile on her dour expression. Her pixie face...

"GRIMOOR!"

"Coming, Mistress." He snickered.

The Golden Eternity

By Dwayne B. Frazure

The first couple days after I died had been unremarkable, even boring. All right, that's not entirely true. At first, my wails of anguish and pity must have been an impressive display had anyone been there to see it. But no one was there. I sat alone on the side of a dark trail, lit only by the dimmest of gray lights.

The only thing I knew for sure was that I was dead. One doesn't have his arms torn from his body by a Minotaur, followed by a gruesome goring and a bit of a trample and wake up the next morning without pain unless his soul has left his body in the interim. There was also that gut-twisting (symbolically speaking) moment when I looked at my hands and saw right through

them, like they were nothing but shadow or mist. I don't know how long I cried out, but I'm a little glad I was alone.

When I finally became rational, I took inventory of my soul. I hadn't been to the Holy City to purify myself in the waters of Aberan since I was a boy, and my last worship of any kind was more than a dozen years prior to my death. Yet, I recalled being taught that when someone died they rode the emerald-masted ship of Dhagian to the golden shores of eternity to live in bliss forever. Maybe I never really believed that was literally true, but I certainly didn't hear anything about landing on a gray trail all by myself.

After a day or two—it's hard to track time because there are no real days or nights—I assessed my situation and tried to figure out what I would do next. At least it wasn't too hot or too cold. I couldn't see anything around me to eat or drink, and thought of my normally ravenous appetite, before laughing at my own folly. Without guts, I'd need no food or drink. I doubted I could get any deader. Somehow, that gave me a little comfort. However, I quickly wished I hadn't thought of my stomach. Although I didn't need food to survive, the pain of hunger began to gnaw at my soul. The desire to indulge my appetite burned within, and I began to ache.

I needed to figure out what I would do. The only option I perceived was to follow the trail, so I arose and began to walk. After what must have been a good part of a day, I finally saw something move on the trail ahead of me. A bent figure of a woman, dragging a bucket like a laundry girl with a heavy load, scooted across the trail. It was an intersection of sorts with only the faint indication of a gray light showing where the woman had come from.

"Hold up, there, M'lady." I hurried to catch her before she moved away from my path.

She stopped at the sound of my voice, let the bucket go and sat on the trail in a heap of shimmering, yet transparent skirt. Her expression made me stop instantly. She didn't offer the smile of one who was on her way to the golden shores. Lines creased around her brow, mouth and eyes. But, her eyes themselves were the most remarkable. Like holes in a fence, there was no substance to them. She looked more like an animated body than a soul. I wondered how I looked.

She said nothing, so I continued, "Pardon me, but can you tell me what this place is?"

The wooden mouth tried to smile. "It is the netherlife." She shifted a little, the gray light seeming to move with her.

"The *netherlife*?" I peered into her bucket and was surprised to see it more than half full of gold coins. I couldn't suppress the greedy thoughts that seeped into my mind. This woman wouldn't last long on a roadside with such a fortune in the life before.

She noticed me staring at the bucket, but did not move to protect it. "The life between. The time we must clean our souls of impurities before boarding the ship."

I could scarce take my eyes off the gold. *What would I do with it?* I thought. I didn't even have real pockets to hold such a bounty. "What do you mean? How are we supposed to clean our souls, or even know if they need cleaning?"

Her laugh sounded strange, like a horn blown through a hollow log. "My soul was plenty dark when I started, but it was nothing compared to your own." The laugh eventually trailed off.

I didn't know what to say. I wasn't a murderer, robber, or criminal of any kind, really. "Why do you say that?"

"I can see the filth coursing through you," she said, moving to get up.

I looked down and could see what she meant. Gray and black smudges ran through my soul like blood in arteries. I felt dirty and ashamed. Then, I started to see more around me than the dim path. Grass grew next to the path and a yellow light beamed above. I couldn't see much

more, but colors became apparent.

She was standing when I looked back at her. "Ah, you're starting to see. That's a beginning." She pulled at the handle of the bucket and started dragging it along the path, which was now a sandy brown in the pale light.

"Would you like me to help you with the bucket?" I said, surprised at my offer for help.

"No, you'll have plenty of your own soon enough."

I was about to ask what she meant when a team of horses pulling a long wagon rode up. The wagon master, a shallow-chinned man with bright eyes, jumped down and walked to the rear of the wagon.

"Jagen Horstend?" he said.

"Yes."

"I've brought you your gold."

Excitement rippled through me and I thought I saw my soul shimmer as he pulled out two huge buckets brimming with coins. "Are those all for me?"

The man nodded, unable to speak from the effort of unloading the fortune.

I looked around, still unable to see much beyond the trail. "Where can I spend them?"

His laugh was as merry as the woman's had been hollow. "You are to spend them as recompense for the wrongs you've committed." He looked me straight in the eye. "There's a coin for every sin, and it's up to you to find a way to repay your debts."

The buckets looked huge. "I still don't know where I'm supposed to spend them."

"You have to figure that out on your own. It's different for everybody. But, I'll tell you this much, you won't even be able to see where you're going until you see your guilt." He stepped back to the wagon and climbed up.

"Don't worry, your recollection will brighten, but with it will come the pain of sorrow."

I was almost too shocked to speak. "And after that, I'll get to ride the Dhagian to the golden shores?"

"When your soul is purged, yes." He tipped his hat to me. "Don't worry, we'll see each other again."

"When I've emptied my buckets?" I asked.

"Yes. I have another thirty or so loads to refill you with."

Maybe I shouldn't have been a lawyer, I thought.

Divining Borders
By David McGillveray

There was a sound in the street outside. Frostrin looked up from his maps and, unable to resist, slipped from behind the desk and went to the window where he tentatively twitched at the heavy, velvet, blackout curtain. He spent more time peering from the window these evenings than at work, compelled by his fraying nerves. It had become a compulsion, a malady for difficult times. Three storeys below, a phalanx of four soldiers in tight formation stamped past with rifles held to their chests and filtered moonlight shining on their helmets. Then the silence of curfew returned to the cobbled streets of the Old Town.

He sat back at the desk and felt the leather chair creak beneath him. He readjusted the head of his table lamp and watched as shadows convulsed and made mystery in the eaves. A map was spread out before him, a fragment of a corner of some far-flung province but of no lesser importance because of it. It need not represent a great city or a disputed border to hold significance. Maps were his life. The walls of the tiny apartment wore them like skin. Shelves were stacked with folded cartography and umbrella stands were filled with rolled up scrolls. Maps were like windows, but today his notebook was empty. Perhaps he was afraid of what he would see.

Most of your countrymen are long gone, yet you still linger. These are draining times for us all with our nations at war. Your love for the Tinween must be great to endure the enmity of the city.

Frostrin looked up sharply, a finger frozen on the paper. There came the soft sound of a door downstairs being closed quietly, a voice cut off, the creak of a floorboard and then a knock. It was soft, polite and terrifying. He had been waiting for that knock ever since the war turned against the Tinween. He imagined it was the knock heard by many of the missing.

"Who is it?" he called.

The handle turned and the door opened. A man stepped into the room. "Anders Frostrin?" he asked. He was dressed in the familiar corduroy cap, leather jerkin and canvas trousers of a dockworker but there was little wear in the clothes. His fingernails were clean, and the eyes . . . his jet eyes noticed everything. They darted into corners and crawled on the walls. Everything about him screamed *Ghost*: the Secret Police.

"Yes?"

The man came further forward and pulled a piece of paper from inside his jerkin. "Anders Frostrin," he repeated, not a question this time. As if it had ever been a question. "Resident of Tinwa, Tinwa Province for thirteen years but national of Handurch, in the Democratic Western Union since birth. Forty-two years old, unmarried, father to none, diviner of maps." The man smiled and turned the paper over in his fingers. It was blank. "You see? All done without the use of notes."

Frostrin swallowed, composed himself. "Who are you?"

"Oh, I think you know who I am, Mr. Frostrin, or at least what I represent. But you can call me Hesh." He sat in the easy chair across the desk.

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Featured Artist
Kerem Beyit

Age: 24
Residence: Turkey
Marital Status: Single
Children: None
Hobbies: Drawing, Reading
Personal Quote: I am not dealing with accuracy...
Favorite Book or Author: Puslu Kýtalar Atlasý by Ýhsan Oktay Anar, The Stand by Stephen King, Phantoms by Dean Koontz
Started Painting: I've been dealing with colors for a year now, but I've been drawing since I was a kid.
Artist Most Inspired By: Frazetta, Gerald Brom, Iain McCaig, Ryan Church, Claudio Villa, Serpieri...
Media You Work In: Digital Media.
Educational/Training Background: I graduated from Gazi Universtiy Graphic Design Department, but it has nothing to do with my profession.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Here and there. I mainly do book covers for the publishers.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: You can buy my prints at: http://kerembeyit.deviantart.com/store/ and you can contact me at: kerembeyit@hotmail.com
Website URL: http://kerembeyit.gfxartist.com/

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I saw a Conan comic book when I was five. The cover art deeply inspired me. (It was Bob Larkin. I still remember.) And I started drawing...

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: Well, I don't have a certain style. I am an illustrator and so I have to draw in many styles, but personally I like drawing macabre pieces.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Movies, books, comics, my dreams, other artists...

continued on next page

Q: What inspired this piece (our cover art)? (Tell us its story...)
A: Mushroom Hill... I just wanted to create a sunny piece with green meadows. I love Middle Earth. And I love huge & tiny compositions.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: Well, influences are always changing. It's not a "static" thing. When I was a kid, I was heavily influenced by the comic artists like Gray Kwapisz and John Buscema. Then I met HR Giger and Zdzislaw Beksinski when I was young. Now I like Iain McCaig and Ryan Church.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Well, nothing great has happened yet.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/ Fantasy genre?
A: Well there is a massive growing anime trend in all kinds of genres (It's been growing for 5 years!), and it involves the sci-fi/fantasy as well. Some of them are really great. I don't pick styles as long as it is working, but the majority of this anime trend is just garbage.

Physical Description: Painting a Beautiful Picture with a Few Brush Strokes

By Brendon Taylor

One of my favorite fantasy artists is Larry Elmore, who creates incredibly detailed images and landscapes that have a very real feel. In fact, Jeff Wheeler gave me a framed Elmore print as a wedding present, which I enjoy to this day. How many wedding presents do you remember ten years down the road? My Elmore is one of the few I can recall being given by a specific person. Although the advice to give high-quality framed art as a wedding gift may be worthwhile to receive, this article is directed toward writing rather than wedding gift shopping. Notwithstanding the foregoing praise for Elmore paintings and their incredible detail, my advice is not to be the writing equivalent of Larry Elmore. Intricate detail may be beautiful to look at as oil on canvas, but as printer's ink on the pages of a book, less is often more.

Let's begin with a blank page. That is where all stories begin, is it not? Imagine sitting down to write a story or even a new scene of a story and staring at a blank computer screen or holding a pen with a clean pad of paper in your lap. Or, for those of you who use a typewriter, imagine opening a fresh ream of paper and rolling the first sheet into the machine. Perhaps you will begin your story or scene with a witty bit of dialogue. Maybe you will start with gut-wrenching internal conflict over which your character agonizes. Then, again, you may be inclined to describe the physical setting in which the scene shall take place.

Whether it comes in the opening paragraph of some paragraphs later, you will need to describe where the scene occurs. Unless your story happens in a vacuum, you will need some physical description of the setting. How are you going to write physical description into your stories so the reader sees the image you want him or her to see? Allow me to lay out the formula to successful physical description writing:

Your Descriptions Should be More Than Stick Figure Drawings, but Less Than Pointillism Masterpieces

There, I previously advised that you should use less description than an Elmore painting and have now told you to use more than a stick figure drawing. (For those of you not familiar with pointillism, I will explain at the end of the article.) If that is not sufficiently clear, let me offer two examples.

Example 1

> It was a clear morning on the dusty mountain when the weary travelers marched into trouble.

Example 2

> The sun had risen until it was nearly free of the horizon and found welcome in a sky barren of clouds, birds, and dragons. Droplets of dew were almost as scarce as the thin-strand grass clumps that dotted the slope of Kerdinian Ridge. Little moved on the mountainside, only an occasional ground squirrel, chittermouse, or fan-tailed lizard. Tall cacti rose like tombstones on the horizon, homes to the night falcons, owls, and peck-beaks that bore holes between the barbs. Even the birds knew to keep out of the sun on a morning like this. A lazy trail switched back and forth up the slope. It was carved into the mountainside by centuries of use by desert goats and traders that had to find some way over the ridge. Dust rose in puffs with each step the company made. The puffs came as though the mountain itself was caught in a coughing fit as the fifteen men marched up the slope. Their long pants and sleeves might keep the men warmer than they liked, but they kept the unforgiving sun off their skin, which was even more important. Most of the men wore wide-brimmed hats that drooped in the morning, already heavy with sweat. Drips left muddy splotches on their shoulders in uneven patterns. Other men, not wise enough to buy such hats, wrapped cloth around their necks and over their heads. Their faces peeled with crisp, red flesh and flies lingered around the sores, darting to the tender spots when the men failed to shoo them away. Finally, a bird could be seen overhead, making wide, gliding loops high above. A carrion bird. It was a dreadful omen.

In the interest of not losing your attention, I will cut off Example 2 right there. A few readers might favor Example 1, while a handful of others might prefer Example 2. Most, however, would prefer something in between. Those who prefer Example 1 are those who like to get the sensory details out of the way quickly and get right to the action or witty dialogue. That was the style I preferred when I started writing. Others, including many Robert Jordan fans, are content to stroll through the lengthy physical descriptions of scenes, through paragraph after paragraph of prose, and nibble at the plot as it is spread out over hundreds of pages. That is the way I tend to write now, if I don't keep myself in check. I noticed this about myself as I read Mortal Amusement to my son this past week. Pardon the shameless plug, but that is the novella I wrote, which appears in *Deeper Magic, The First Collection*.

Back to the above-mentioned formula, (patent pending). When it comes to physical description, how much is enough and how much is too much? A story needs enough description to invoke mental images and create a setting for the action. Is it enough to write that the group of travelers moved across a dusty mountain? Perhaps it is. If the group is just passing through and nothing is going to happen there, you may not want to waste too many words on the description. If that is the case, consider why you are even writing about the dusty mountain. The scene may not need to be there at all. Remember, you do not need to describe every step your character takes, or every field he walks through on his thousand mile journey to greatness.

If something important is about to happen, you will want to give the reader a better sense of the setting and environment. This, again, is to prevent action from occurring in a vacuum. You do not want that to happen. In the 10 Rules of Dialogue article Jeff Wheeler wrote last month, one of the rules suggested having your characters move and do things while they are talking to prevent the "talking head" problem. Having action or dialogue occur with little or no physical description creates a similar problem. Certainly some description is necessary.

What if the setting is a fairly nondescript place? Easy, less physical description will be required. If the location is a dark prison cell, few environmental elements may be present. Yet, if you simply write, "Jordabrin hunkered in the dark, wet cell, awaiting certain death when Lord Lanfringale arrived," you may be missing opportunities. By writing too little about the setting, you may be shortchanging tension. A few additional details would enrich the previous example:

> A slow drip in the far corner of the dark cell reminded Jordabrin of the torrential rains that persisted for most of the year in this region. The drip would be enough to drive many men mad if they spent years in the prison. Jordabrin would not have to worry about that. Lord Lanfringale would arrive before the sun set and death would come with him. Already, the pale light that seeped through cracks in the stone walls began to dim. Evening was not far off. Cracked as they were, the stone was stubborn; Jordabrin's hands still ached from pounding at every crack. He sighed and slumped to the wet floor. At least he would be free of the rancid smell of mold when the lord called him out.

Let me share a couple things I tried to accomplish with that paragraph that relate to physical description. First, the action occurs in a dark cell, so there is not much visually to describe. I included a few specific details:

1. It is dark.
2. There is a slow, persistent drip.
3. The sunlight seeps through the wall.
4. The wall is cracked and made of stone.
5. The floor is wet.
6. There is rancid mold.

That is not a lengthy list. Nor is it remarkable. It could be just about any prison cell from any medieval/fantasy setting. Yet, those facts add flavor to the story and allow tension to be built by how they are used. The non-descriptive details are more important here, so I blended them in with the physical description.

1. Jordabrin is trapped.
2. Night is close and he does not expect to survive until sunset if he cannot escape the cell.
3. He has tried to find a way out, but he cannot.
4. He sees that his time is almost up, and slumps to the floor, seeming to give up.

I often see submissions to Deep Magic, and sometimes see it in my own writing, where the physical description is written in one paragraph or a few paragraphs and then the action occurs separately. That seldom works as well as when the description and action are blended together. Discretion must be applied, however, because you would not want to break up a climactic scene to include a line about the bluebirds twittering about the gazebo on the far side of the courtyard when your heroes are about to thwart your villains. But, as you are building tension, that is a good time to add descriptive details.

The purpose of adding descriptive detail is to make the story come to life and engage

the reader. In order to best do that, the physical description should include sensory details that reach more senses. In the example above, I added details that engaged the senses of sight (darkness with light coming through the cracks), sound (dripping of water), smell (rancid mold), and touch (wet floor and hard stone walls). Those details add dimension to the description.

The key is to add enough details that the scene comes alive, without so many details that the reader tires, waiting for something to happen. Now, from my example above, do you know whether the prison cell was square, rectangular or some other shape? No (only that it has at least one corner). Did you know whether the ceiling was six feet, eight feet, or twenty feet high? No. Did you know what kind of door (if any) it had? No. I did not think those things were important enough to take time explaining. Choose the important details, or those you think will add the most dimension to your scene without hindering the progress of the plot, and use them well.

Having said that, will everyone picture the same image from the written scene? No, and that is a good thing. If you add so much detail that everyone sees essentially the same image in their minds, you have added too much. It would take so many words and lines to paint the scene in the kind of detail necessary for everyone to see it the same way that I can not imagine many instances, if any, that you would want to do so.

The same rule is true of character descriptions. Some authors feel the need to tell their readers exactly what each character looks like. They describe hair color, eye color, height, weight, complexion, build, frame, bearing, expression, shape of ears, eyes, nose, cheeks, jowls, neck, ankles, waist and legs, and clothing. Some authors do just the opposite and write virtually no physical description of their characters. Again, something in the middle may be generally preferable.

My recommendation when deciding how much physical description to write about your characters is a follows:

1. Consider the point of view first. If your point of view is from a sixteen-year-old boy, how likely is it that he will notice the shape of his eighteen-year-old brother's jaw or dwell on the color of his eyes? Probably not very likely. Now, you do not have to be graphic and dwell on the aspects of the attractive maiden he notices. However, be true to the descriptions that would be consistent with your point of view character. Even if you have an omniscient third person point of view, the story will be primarily about certain characters, and you want to keep your descriptions consistent with those characters' point of view.

2. Keep a notebook of what your characters look like. As with every aspect of your story, you need to know much more about the story than your reader ever sees. This is especially true about your characters. Perhaps the most important reason to keep notes on your characters' physical appearance is to keep them consistent. You do not want Jordabrin to have shoulder length brown hair at the beginning of Chapter Two, only to later have closely cropped red hair in Chapter Eight, unless he had a haircut and dye job somewhere in between. Another reason keeping notes about your characters is useful is because you will want to parse out different descriptive details throughout the story. Perhaps you note the fair princess is tall and graceful when you first see her. In a later scene, when she falls into a moat, you may want to revisit the issue of her gracefulness, but also describe how her long, auburn hair matts to her face as the muddy water drips down her back.

3. Choose a trait or two that are dominant and mention them. Rather than giving a head-to-toe rundown of a person's appearance, hit the highlights. Look at people you know and think how you would capture their physical appearance in a sentence or two. If I were writing Jeremy Whitted into a story, I might say something like, "The man behind the desk looked at me with a penetrating gaze. I wondered whether he knew that I had written something about him behind his back. Then, a covetous smile twitched on his face, making his red beard quiver, and I knew that he was just eyeing the donut I held in my hand. It was a Krispy Kreme." From that passage, you gleaned Jeremy has a red beard and a penetrating gaze. You don't know that he is about six feet tall, is of medium build, has blue eyes, or that he likes to sing. Maybe those things come out elsewhere in the story, but you certainly do not need to know everything about him at once. The same is true of your fictional characters. And, here is a secret you ought to know: most readers don't remember all of the descriptive facts you write about each character, especially if you include a lot of them.

4. Never have a character look at himself in a mirror, pond, shield, or any other reflective surface and describe his physical appearance. Few people are that vain, and fewer readers want to read about one who is. It is a tired device and one that does not improve your story. Here is another secret, readers will fill the gaps that you leave. If you never tell your readers what color a person's hair is, they will create the information themselves and not feel cheated in having to do so. Or, if that sort of thing is not important to them, they will not miss the omission.

As usual, I have written twice as much as was necessary on the subject. Best of luck in writing physical and sensory detail into your stories. And, just so you know I did not forget, pointillism is the artistic technique of creating images from tiny dots of paint. The artist famous for using this technique was Georges Seurat, and his most famous work was "Sunday Afternoon on the Island of la Grande Jatte."

Flinteye's Duel

By Sean T. M. Stiennon

Jax Callam had a new pair of ion pistols strapped to his hips as he came off the transport. They were fine weapons, decorated with the purest violet gold, and their butts were studded with pressure gems from the depths of the Devil's Nebula. Each was capable of putting out enough power to shatter a ton of uranium. They had cost several million SEUs. Guns worthy of the greatest gunman in the galaxy.

He walked with a swagger through the streets, and beings cowered before him. He gleamed with splendor befitting his station, a cape of microscopic golden scales thrown over his shoulders with a brooch of red sapphire holding it in place. His boots were sewn from the hides of snap-snakes and his head was wrapped by a force circlet. It was only fitting that he should look his best on this day. Today, he was going to kill Jalazar Flinteye. That deed would ensure that his name was enthroned forever in the galaxy's underworld.

The streets of the city were clean enough, with just enough dust to stain the soles of Jax's boots. The only patrol stations visible were abandoned–the Alliance had removed its presence from Erbatess years ago, and now a local ruler held limited sway over most of its lands. The perfect place for a man like Jax to ply his trade and establish his name among the stars. High towers of light-colored stone soared above him, and the streets were paved with the same material. Beings of many species walked the streets–salesmen, tourists, native Erbatessols, lowlifes, an occasional beggar, and many others. The weather was bright and warm, much like it always was at Jax's carefully weather-controlled home. His decadent home where only money mattered.

He froze. Flinteye could see infrared–how could he have forgotten? This room must be like day to him with all the body heat in it. Jax wouldn't forget that twice.

The place he was looking for was sunk into the shadows of a back alley with a bright neon sign above the door. An insectoid bouncer with two and a half meters of thick exoskeleton stood in front of it, but he let Jax pass with a nod and a click of his mandibles. The sign read "Star Plasma Bar" and fluctuated between several different colors and spectrums. Jax, a human, could see only some of them–the rest looked like gray or brown, and sometimes the light even seemed to be off. The Erbatessols could see more than most beings in the galaxy.

It was dark inside. The only real brightness came from a spotlight in the center of the room, beneath which a band was playing on some sort of reed instruments and drums made from animal shell. Their wailing pierced Jax's ears, making him cringe. A few dim blue and violet lamps were scattered about the room, and by their light Jax could see beings sitting at tables, gliding through the darkness, and conversing in hushed tones. The bar was at the far side of the room, lit up with an eery green color.

Jax's golden cape rustled as he went in. He moved through the room, scanning each booth. It was one of the tamer bars on the planet, but that wasn't saying a lot. Some beings growled, some leered, some smiled suggestively. He ignored them all–he could deal with any trouble

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Interview
Sean T. M. Stiennon

Sean's stories usually have a strong element of adventure in them, but he also likes to include tragedy and loss along with roaring battles. In Deep Magic, he's most famous for the Flinteye stories, and several of those adventures have been published in Deep Magic. A collection containing several Flinteye stories is coming up from Silver Lake Publishing, entitled "Six with Flinteye." It will be released on July 1.

Age: 17
Residence: Madison, Wisconsin
Marital Status: Single, naturally
Children: None
Hobbies: Writing, reading, book reviewing...
Personal Quote: "Nulla dia sine linea" ("Never a day without a line") — Emile Zola
Favorite Book or Author: Right now, I've got a few: Stephen Lawhead, for his *Song of Albion* trilogy, Tad Williams for all his fantasy, and Tim Powers.
Professional and Educational Information: I'm still working my way through high school, but I'm thinking about a history Ph.D.
First time you tried to get something published: I sent a slash-em-up historical fiction story inspired by my studies to a literary magazine...ouch!
Authors Most Inspired By: Tad Williams and Tim Powers, for their upbeatness and friendliness to fans. Howard Andrew Jones is a small-press author I know who is becoming increasingly successful, and he shows me that I can make it, too.
Schools Attended: Uh...I'll leave out the early ones and just mention St. Ambrose Academy, where I take some classes to supplement my homeschooling.
Published works (fiction/non-fiction/obituaries): My short story collection *Six with Flinteye* is out from Silver Lake Publishing, and I've also had stories in Deep Magic, Amazing Journeys Magazine, and The Sword Review. I also won second place in the 2004 SFReader.com Short Story Contest with my story "Asp."
Website URL: www.sfreader.com/authors/seanstiennon

Q: What challenges have you faced being such a young writer? Any advantages?
A: Surprisingly few challenges, although I obviously haven't had as much time to read, study, and gain experience as older writers. Most authors, editors, and readers I've encountered have been very supportive. I actually think my youth has more advantages than disadvantages—I've got plenty of time, for one thing, and most people are eager to help me out.

Q: Tell us about Flinteye. What inspired the character? What do you have in store for him?
A: The origin of the name is really weird and involves me trying to remember the first name of

Captain Nathaniel Flint from *Treasure Island* (I thought it was Salazar. Salazar Flint...hmm...). The character is somewhat inspired by the Star Wars novels I used to read in large quantities. In them, and in the movies, there were hints of a fascinating criminal underworld in the Star Wars galaxy, along with side characters such as Boba Fett and Bossk. The books tended to focus on the heroes, though, and that stuff was usually left in the shadows. So, Flinteye is my attempt at space opera told from the side of the underworld—the mercenaries, bounty hunters, thieves, and other such scum. The character himself is someone I've been imagining in various forms since I first made up stories in my head.

I'm currently working on a Flinteye novel, which expands on "Hunting with Flinteye," the first story in *Six with Flinteye* (most of the novel takes place after the basic events of that story), and I've recently completed my eighth Flinteye story and am in the process of sending it around. I've got enough ideas for short stories and novels to keep me going for quite a while. Chass, Svaalij, and Okcron from *Six with Flinteye* will all return (Chass features in the newest story), and I've got many other ideas for great supporting characters, both allies and villains, and new adventures.

Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?
A: Well, given the location of this interview, I'd say the Internet is critical to me. I've corresponded with other writers and editors, used online workshops, submitted my work by e-mail, frequented discussion forums, and had my work published on the Internet. It allows me to connect with people and publications I might never have encountered otherwise—my cover artist, for example, lives in Europe, and without the Internet I would never have discovered him.

Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?
A: Star Wars books were important, as I've said above, and Brian Jacques' Redwall series was one of the main things I read early on. Both of those have had a significant impact on my writing. Tad Williams' Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn trilogy shaped my views of what high fantasy can be, and the anime films of Hayao Miyazaki show me the heights of imagination to which I must aspire.

Of course, my religion has also been important—I'm a practicing Catholic, and I try not to write anything that's out of step with my beliefs. Of course, as Flinteye proves, I don't feel any need to write overtly religious stories, or ones in which the heroes are saints.

Q: What have you been reading lately?
A: I'm currently working my way through Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*. I've been reading mostly fantasy, with some mysteries, historical, and non-fiction mixed in. The majority of my reading is still fantasy and science fiction, but I'm trying to broaden my scope.

Q: How much of your time do you devote to writing?
A: Not nearly enough, but I manage to get things done.

Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: A combination of ambition and discipline, I'd say, which sounds more high-minded than it is. My main discipline is that I write something every day. It doesn't matter how little it is—but I do write something. Writing just one line often makes it easier to write another one, and then a whole page or more. Ambition reminds me that I need to write if I want to be a writer.
Q: What other stories are you working on? Can you tell us about any of them?
A: Aside from the Flinteye novel, I'm trying to do some serious worldbuilding for other story ideas. I'm also working on a series of heroic fantasy short stories chronicling the adventures of Varkeon, a reptilian swordsman with a rough past and a rougher present. I've completed two stories and I'm finishing up with a third. I'll probably do more worldbuilding for that, and then get into writing more stories about Varkeon after the Flinteye novel is complete.

Six with Flinteye
Sean T.M. Stiennon
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Six with Flinteye is now available from Silver Lake Publishing! The book is also available from Amazon.com, BarnesandNoble.com, and Project Pulp, and a downloadable e-book is available through Fictionwise.com.
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Christian Lorenz Scheurer

Born in Bern, Switzerland, Christian Lorenz Scheurer now lives in the Hollywood Hills of California. He has worked on many hit Hollywood films, including The Fifth Element, Titanic, Dark City, What Dreams May Come, The Matrix, and Final Fantasy, The Spirit Within. He currently works as a visual consultant to top industry leaders and has recently published two training DVD's on how to create matte paintings and high-end conceptual art (found here and here).

Website:

http://www.christianlorenzscheurer.com/

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Interview
Barb and J.C. Hendee

Barb & JC Hendee live just outside of Boulder, Colorado, close to the Rocky Mountains. Both are online college instructors in English; JC teaches for Metropolitan State College of Denver and Barb teaches for the University of Colorado at Denver. Although they have worked together as a writing team before, Dhampir (ROC Fantasy) and its sequels (Thief of Lives, 1/2004; Sister of the Dead, 1/2005; Traitor to the Blood, 1/2006; Rebel Fay, 1/2007) are their first novel-length collaborations.

First time you tried to get something published:
Barb: 1990. I sent a story to a small magazine called *After Hours*. The editor bought it and paid me $14.00. :)
J.C.: Hmm, it was after Barb's first time, and I don't remember where. I was paid nothing but contributor's copies from a small press magazine.

Authors Most Inspired By:
Barb: Anita Shreve, Tracy Chevalier, and Philipa Gregory.
J.C.: Tanith Lee (early works), Gene Wolfe (early works), William Horwood.

Schools Attended: We both did our bachelor's and our master's degrees at the University of Idaho in Moscow.
Degrees: J.C. has a bachelor's in creative writing and a master's in creative writing. Barb has a bachelor's in creative writing and a master's in composition theory.

Published works (fiction/non-fiction/obituaries):
J.C.: At this point, the only thing I would list is the novels we've done. All my other publications credits (fiction, non-fiction, poetry), with the exception of an article for Writer's Market and some nominations for the Rhysling, aren't worth mentioning.
Website URL: www.nobledead.com

Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published?
Barb: Back around 2001, I had an agent who worked with lesser-known writers, and he submitted the outline and first three chapters of *Dhampir* to Jennifer Heddle at Roc in New York. All we had written on the project were the first three chapters and the outline. She responded with "piqued" interest but would not make a decision until we finished the book. I was teaching college on campus back then, and J.C. was a partner in an IT consultancy. We were both really busy.

Then my agent hung up his hat and released all his clients. It took J.C. and I over a year to complete *Dhampir*, but by that point, I no longer had an agent to represent us. Keep in mind that Roc (like most New York houses) will not look at unagented manuscripts. Since we already had an invitation from Jennifer Heddle, we sent her the completed project. I called Dan Hooker at the Ashley Grayson Literary Agency, and he agreed to represent us if she made an offer. She did, and not only for *Dhampir* but also for an untitled/unoutlined sequel (later titled *Thief of*

Lives). Within the span of a month, we suddenly had a New York publisher and a reputable agent. However, we were extremely lucky in both areas because it's so hard to get an agent without a deal on the table, and it's almost impossible to get a publisher without an agent.

Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?
J.C.: Well, on the readers' side, we actually get to interact with our readers a bit. Whether through email or one our site's forums (sealiontavern.nobledead.com), it is nice to hear their thoughts – and more than just that, they liked the books. Some of them get pretty detailed.
***Barb*:** Oh, and I think writers have a lot more contact with their editors now. We e-mail about once a week with our current editor Liz Scheier—sometimes more. Back in the "days" of letters and phone calls, this would not have been possible.

I'm also incorrigible about checking best seller lists online during the months when one of our novels is released. J.C. rolls his eyes at me—I like seeing our books on the charts.

Q: What has been your inspiration for the settings?
Barb: One night we were researching another project when we came across an interesting entry in a book called *The Vampire Encyclopedia* by Mathew Bunson. It related information regarding the origins of the "dhampir," a name given by Slavonic gypsies to the child of a vampire. In medieval Serbia and Yugoslavia, charlatans took advantage of this myth by pretending to be dhampirs. They would convince a troubled village that it was beset by a vampire, and that only a dhampir could see the undead creature. Then they would stage elaborate "battles" and claim they had destroyed the vampire—and charge the village quite a fee. This is what sparked the original idea, and the story of Magiere and Leesil began to grow. So, I think our inspiration for the "setting" just comes from the characters and concept of the characters—if that makes sense.
J.C.: The world is loosely based on one from a novel written for my master's in English, but it has been reshaped in many ways. Now it has grown into something neither of us first conceived. In some minor ways, I might even say the world itself is a character that we work with in ways similar to our protagonists, antagonists, and those who fall in the gray area between. As some can see from our stories, we do like to play in the gray, where a hero or villain is a matter of perspective. This play is where we find some of our best ideas – even in the beginning.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters?
Barb: In our books? My fave is definitely Leesil because he tends to write his own scenes. He just runs away with the story. But I also love Magiere, Wynn, and Chap. I don't think you can write the characters unless they feel "real" to you. Chane is a lot of fun to write too. He's so caught between two worlds.
J.C.: Hmmm… Again, hard to choose, and Barb and I spend equal time with all of our characters, but if forced to pick, then I pick Magiere (with Leesil a hair's breadth behind as second). Once I've got her in my head, she can tell me exactly what she would and wouldn't do, think, feel, etc. And if I get it wrong… well, anyone who's read the books knows what she's like.

Q: What influences have helped you become the writers you are?
J.C.: Impossible to answer, and any answer provided is often fabricated for the moment. There have been people, places, pursuits and other things that have brought me to where I am, but it would be a long and convoluted list. Let's just say I'm comfortable in my own imagination. I live there, not as an escape, but as a second realm of realism. And it's a realm built to be real rather

than just flights of fancy. Any writer focused on a genre of premise (SF, Fantasy, Mystery, etc.) has to be able to do this. And the synchronicity of marrying someone who turned out to be the same way… well… what can I say but that's the primary influence.
Barb: I never know how to answer that question. I think some human beings just have imaginary people and stories running around inside their heads. All communities have story tellers. As far as writing goes, I think it's like learning to play the piano. It takes years, and the more you practice, the better you become. J.C. and I just seemed naturally able to blend our strengths and try to help cover for one another's weaknesses, but as time passes (we're just starting our fifth novel together), this gets easier, too.

Q: What have you both been reading lately?
Barb: Yikes! Right now, I'm reading *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood. It's awesome. I'm also reading a non-fiction book called *The Feminine Face of God* by Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins.
J.C.: I don't really read fiction anymore. Mostly I read obscure occult and metaphysical works, or I'm tracking down some new English translation of a core Taijiquan text.

Q: How much of your time do you devote to writing?
J.C.: Depends on what part of the process we're involved in and what time of the year it is. Managing full time teaching jobs and a personal life on top of professional writing sometimes means talking about weeks and months rather than hours in days for what and when we get any writing done.
Barb: I wish we could tell you that we write every day, but we don't. And per our contract with Roc, we owe our publisher the first draft of a new novel every February 1st. So we tend to get a new book started during the three week break between semesters in mid-August. Together, we write up a thirty page outline of the entire story.
J.C.: Meaning a "narrative" outline, not just a multiple level item list. We break things down by chapter, scene, and character POV. And each item is rendered descriptively as a synopsis of that section. This isn't anything special; many (most) professional writers do this one way or another.
Barb: We write as much as we possibly can during the fall semester in-between grading massive assignments, and then we have a month off at Christmas. We go into total binge mode, and we write all day for about a month. We turn the book in on February 1st and by March our editor sends it back to us with her revision requests.
J.C.: And we do mean revision, not re-writes as in changing the way passages are written. Characters disappear or are expanded sometimes. New subplots or plot threads are introduced. And then we also do the "rewrite" as in changing the prose and rendering of the work as needed.
Barb: This major revision is due by the end of May (smiles). Yes, that's right, two months tops to get it done, sometimes less.
J.C.: And some of those revision notes have been as long as 15 single-spaced pages.
Barb: Then we teach until August, and start the whole process again. One day, I'm going to wake up with nothing to do and feel very confused.

Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
J.C.: First, it is important to cut through the misconceptions. Blockage isn't a *problem*, it is a

symptom. I fight with intermittent and chronic blockage. So every time I hear advice given to young writers on this over-generalized topic, I start to fume.

People experience blockage at different phases in the prose process, hence the origin of blockage can be different, so there is no pat answer or generic Band-Aid. The labels of the phases (which are repeated in various orders or cycles while writing) are known by differing names. I call them Conceptualization, Planning/Outlining, Drafting, Revision, Rewrite, and Editing. As brief examples, the most commonly mentioned issues of blockage (once we look below the generic) occur in "Planning" and "Drafting" phases/cycles among others.

In the "Planning" phase, blockage usually manifests because the writer is writing off the cuff. S/he is trying to write something that hasn't been planned enough. Writing off the cuff is another avoidance of the real work of professional writing. Yes, some writers can do it, but most don't… the vast majority don't. If you hit blockage and you look at the outline and it isn't finished (or isn't sufficiently developed for the length of the work), then the cure is obvious. And this type of blockage will keep coming back until you face the facts about Planning; I guarantee it.

In "Drafting" there is a syndrome called "perfect drafting" or "the perfect drafter." After many years I still fight this one myself. It can manifest in the Re-write stage in a different form. This is when the writer gets stuck on trying to find the perfect way to phrase something. If frustration and dissatisfaction build to a critical level, it can lead to blanking of the conscious mind in the form of a blockage for what to write next… because anything that is written isn't perfect. The solution is hard, for it requires the writer to do two things. First, accept that (contrary to what some think) there is no perfect way to say anything. Secondly, nothing is written in stone, so get it on the page once; then leave it alone no matter how awful it reads in the moment. Perfect drafters can also sometimes be people who can't stand the thought of having to do the Re-write phase later. Those who can't face this are never going to make it, because re-writing is what writing is about.

Barb: I feel totally useless saying this, but I don't seem to get blocked, and I do a lot of our "first drafting." I think the deadlines do help, but really, I just love doing this, and I love doing it with J.C. It's fun.

Alternate Path

By L. S. King

Alcandhor gulped as he entered the conclave chamber. The clan Chiefs sat at the table, their gazes fixed on him. What could they want with a mere stripling Ranger having thirteen years? He walked to the end of the table and faced them, his mind racing through the possibilities of adventures and pranks, dismissing one after another. He had done nothing wrong, er, very wrong—at least, well, surely they would not call conclave for that. And anyway, that had been more Haladhon's escapade than his.

"Alcandhor, we have brought you here, as this concerns you," Saldhor said.

With a nervous swallow, Alcandhor met his father's blue-grey eyes, resisting the urge to pull his leather jerkin down straight. "Aye, sir?"

Saldhor looked down with a sigh, as if he did not wish to speak. "Your brother wishes to be passed over as Thane and let heirship go to his son, if he has one. If not, Thaneship would go to you."

His stomach lurching and falling to his feet, he stared at his brother. Valdhor's long dark hair fell over his hunched shoulders and his eyes lacked their usual arrogance, which unsettled Alcandhor. He had never seen Valdhor look humbled.

"T-to me? But, but Valdhor is the one who has studied for it and has wanted it. He is a much better Ranger than I could ever be!"

"You would be undertaking the same studies while you continue your stripling training in any event, Alcandhor, as do all who will be future Chiefs," his uncle, Lamadhel, said. "Unfortunate events could land any one of us as Thane and we must be prepared."

Alcandhor knew this, but Thaneship seemed safely far away with his brother standing between him and the Thane's chair. He could not imagine Valdhor ever being killed. He was too good a Ranger.

Alcandhor knew this, but Thaneship seemed safely far away with his brother standing between him and the Thane's chair. He could not imagine Valdhor ever being killed. He was too good a Ranger. Though young, he could best men much older than himself and had become a standard that the striplings strove for.

"But, why? Why is he giving it up?" Alcandhor asked. He thought of the recent incident where his brother had beaten Lantalan's child. Many in their clan had expressed rage and demanded sanctions against Valdhor. "Is it because of Marcalan?"

"That is my business," Valdhor said.

"It is Ranger business," Saldhor said, turning to his elder son, "since it affects our whole clan. Do you wish to explain, or shall I?"

Valdhor grimaced, staring at the table. He licked his lips and said, "I do not feel I would be a good Thane. I...have not the temperament for it."

Aye, 'tis because of Marcalan. Alcandhor gritted his teeth, his anger rising. "It is easier to give up Thaneship than try to control yourself and earn back respect?"

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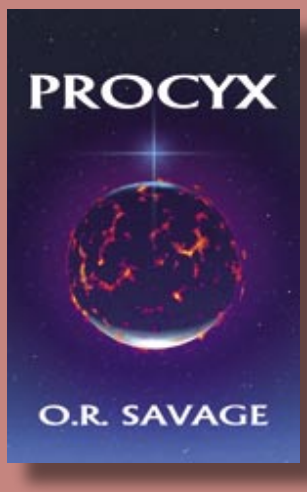

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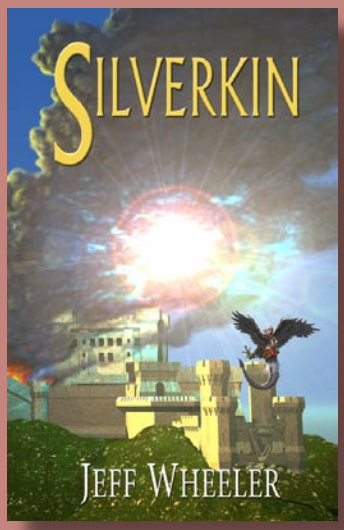

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AMBERLIN BOOKS

Continued from Issue 37

Shadowloom

By Mark Reeder

Chapter Ten

I went to my quarters in the East Tower, chuckling to myself at the fact that Della had placed as much distance between us as she possibly could. Anger seems to produce the same reactions in people as love. I would have chosen the same rooms in order to make her feel comfortable.

I stood in the open doorway, contemplating my room: large, yet sparsely furnished like a soldier's tent. A pair of uncomfortable-looking, straight-back chairs, an officer's camp desk with a writing stool and a bookcase filled with titles were along one wall. A queer-looking rug, assembled from parts of unfinished weavings arranged in no particular pattern and sewn together haphazardly, filled the center of the room. On the outside wall, three groups of jewel-pane windows stared into the night, the moon and stars refracted in their polished facets. Two doors let out into other rooms—one undoubtedly the bath, given the air carried the slight scent of heated water, and the second a bedroom.

A sensation like an icy wind emanated from the fibers. The colors seemed preternaturally vibrant. At the same time, I thought I could see through the weave, like a translucent mist, discerning images in three dimensions.

Not much to see, but still I remained in that doorway, waiting . . . hoping. Nothing jogged any notions of past events that might have happened here.

At last I gave up and entered, closing the door after me and locking it. Lighting an oil lamp, I went through the two rooms as a precaution against ambush and because I did not want to break my promise to Peer.

I returned to the sitting room and placed Thruvir on the weapons rack beside a large fireplace. I struck a flame among the kindling and logs laid upon the scorched hearth. Quickly, a fire took the cold out of the surrounding stone and air.

I crossed the room and stopped at the rug, my foot hovering just above the thick, richly colored fabric. It gleamed with a ghostly quality in the firelight. A chill entered my spine and I cautiously pulled my foot back onto the stone floor. I knelt and, holding the lantern close, ran my hand over the material. A sensation like an icy wind emanated from the fibers. The colors seemed preternaturally vibrant. At the same time, I thought I could see through the weave, like a translucent mist, discerning images in three dimensions. Then it struck me. I was looking into Shadow Weaving remnants hooked together to make this strange rug. I did not know what it meant for me to step onto it; yet, I had the uncanny sensation that I would sink out of sight, as into quicksand. I stood and carefully walked around the material, making a mental note to myself not to stumble upon it in the night.

I went to the desk, deciding that something might well be within to help me remember.

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell
By Susanna Clarke

We've mentioned in this column before how there seems to be no end to the books that are being compared to Harry Potter. It seems that if you want a marketing ploy or a way to get your book noticed, compare it to Harry Potter, even if the comparison is along the lines of "This book is nothing like Harry Potter!" This month's book has had comparisons to Harry Potter, oddly enough, but those comparisons have been along the lines of its publisher, Bloomsbury (who is also the British publisher of the Harry Potter series), hoping that it will be the adult equivalent of Harry Potter: a runaway bestseller. And while it hasn't achieved Potter-esque proportions, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* does deserve it.

The story begins in 1806 in the north of England where a fraternal order of self-proclaimed magicians are confronted with a letter from a Mr Norrell who requests to join their number since he, too, is a magician. Since this order is comprised of a bunch of poseurs, they fear having a real magician, so they set a test for Mr Norrell, a test they believe he would fail, since they all know that magic is dead in England.

But Mr Norrell succeeds at the test and is brought to the attention of the powers that be when he moves to London. Soon he is this year's fad and everyone wants a piece of him. Mr Norrell, although he might be England's only remaining magician, is not much of a socialite (although he wants the adoration he feels is his due) and thus attention is turned to his apprentice, the young Jonathan Strange.

The handsome Strange joins the army in the war against Napoleon, using his skills to help Wellington. Soon, though, Strange becomes enthralled with the shadowy figure of the Raven King, the legendary founder of British magic. As is the course with such fascinations, things don't go well and Strange is soon confronted with having to sacrifice everything he holds dear to gain great power.

Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell is a large book in many ways. First, it is physically large, weighing in at almost 800 pages. It is written in the style of a Victorian novel, and so the narrative is very dense and slow-going, giving it a larger feel than other contemporary 800-page fantasies. Second, it is large in that it tells a very large tale with typical Victorian digressions. The book itself is riddled with footnotes that tell another story that interrelates with the main story of the text, making this a slow, but satisfying read.

In short, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* is not your standard fantasy: it is slow and ponderous and contemplative. It takes a lot of effort to reach the end, but compels the reader to do so. This book has been marketed as an adult fantasy, and it is indeed in the sense that it takes a lot of discipline to get to the end, but by that end, the trip can be said to be worth it.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

The Prodigal Troll

By Charles Coleman Finlay

The story of *The Prodigal Troll* is the story of a man named Maggot. That is not his birth name, but considering he was found as a baby by a grieving troll named Windy who had lost a child of her own, it was a fitting appellation – a slight given by a stubborn adopted father. The novel is part *Tarzan of the Apes*, part *Last of the Mohicans*, and part high fantasy.

The story is told in four narrative parts. The first commences with the story of how Maggot (born Claye Gruethrist) ended up in the care of trolls. His parents' castle was besieged by Baron Culufre and doomed to fall. In order to save the child, Claye's mother entrusted the babe to Xaragitte, a nursemaid, and Yvon, a swordsman to protect them, as they escaped into the castle sewers and fled the siege. Their journey is nothing but a series of obstacles as they try to find a safe haven for the child, but instead only mire themselves deeper into territory now controlled by the baron. The wildness of the world proves too much for Xaragitte and Yvon and both perish, leaving the babe to be discovered by Windy.

The second part of the story reveals how Claye (now Maggot) is treated in troll society. Politically, the trolls have surpassed the humans who share their borders. They have formed a democracy, where leadership and decisions are settled through voting. Culturally, they are as sophisticated in their mores and customs as gorillas. Maggot fights to fit in, but his obvious differences keep him on the fringe of society. After being voted down by the trolls as a candidate for leader, he decides that it is time to find a mate of his own species. Maggot leaves the mountains of the trolls and heads down to the lands settled by humans.

His foray into the world of men begins with the chance discovery of Lady Portia's hunting party. He is entranced by her beauty and tries to woo her with the mating rituals of the trolls, which ends disastrously. Fleeing for safety from her bodyguards, Maggot begins to trail the party in the hopes of meeting her again. Instead, he is entangled with the local primitives who have been displaced by the baron's invasion and violently resist the occupation. He rescues a leader of the resistance, Sinnglas, and participates in his first war, a concept which is completely alien and horrific to him.

The fourth and final section of the book brings the story threads around full circle. Maggot discovers that his name is Claye, and that he has more in common with the invaders than with the primitives. He rescues a knight named Bran, learns his language, and discovers that the woman of his dreams, Portia, is closer than he thought. Risking certain death, the two companions infiltrate a masked ball at the baron's palace where Maggot comes to face the harsh truths of the world and the powers that dominate it. But can a man raised in a democracy of trolls ever feel truly welcome in a world victimized by human politics?

The Prodigal Troll starts off strong but fails to carry the momentum throughout the book. The intro segment is intriguing and full of peril. Yvon and Xaragitte are compelling characters facing very real dangers. The hopelessness of their plight develops gradually, ratcheting up the tension until it climaxes beautifully and tragically. The introduction to troll society is fascinating, but it kept reminding me of Disney's latest foray into the legend of Tarzan, except without the family-friendly backdrop. I struggled the most during the third part of the story. The society of primitives that Maggot joins is starkly patterned after a Native American society (with pipe smoking, axe-wielding, tribal dancing attributes), contesting with imperial "invaders" with their superior numbers and arms. Several times through the story I felt as if the plot points were contrived – Maggot tends to stumble into the main characters at precisely pivotal moments. For example, he learns his real name from a wizard and within minutes, the wizard is brutally killed. He runs into Sinnglas, a strong leader of a tribe, by happenchance as well, and the woman he falls in love with, Portia, just happens to be the girl he was betrothed to, a match between their parents before the baron invaded, yet he does not realize this yet.

While I enjoyed the tension in the front part of the story, the overall plot thread was disappointing as Maggot's motivation for leaving troll society, and throughout the entire book, was to find a mate troll-style (with such wooing words as "you stink a lot"). Hardly the

continued on next page

quest of heroes but a quest nonetheless.

Possible Objectionable Material: occasional strong language and intense violence, and overt sexual themes prevail through the book (though many scenes are in a trollish sort of way that focuses more on the physical anatomy than titillation). Maggot spends much of the book wearing only his skin after all.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

Book Review: Fantasy
The Darkness That Comes Before
By R. Scott Bakker

R. Scott Bakker's first novel introduces the tale of a holy war, declared by a mysterious new religious leader, and held ransom by an emperor, who, between dodging the plots of his mother and the ambitions of his military-genius heir, means to use the crusaders' force to restore his shrinking domain. Behind these struggles, the sorcerer and spy Drusas Achamian sees hints of the machinations of a darker power—the Consult, the evil cabal his school is dedicated to fight. The Consult had worked to bring about the return of the No-God and the second apocalypse before vanishing hundreds of years ago, leaving its enemies, the Mandate sorcerers, looking foolish in their continued insistence despite a near total lack of evidence that the Consult is only underground. After a lifetime of being sent on mission after mission and never finding anything—and now middle-aged and alone—Achamian himself doubts its continued existence.

Meanwhile, in the north, Anasûrimbor Kellhus, descendant of a line of kings thought extinct during the last apocalypse, emerges from an isolated mountain monastery and, following a dream, makes his way south toward the Three Seas and the Holy War. Rigorous training in the monks' philosophy that "what comes before determines what comes after"—the study of Cause and Effect, analyzing probabilities and predicting outcomes, and the hidden roots of the actions of men—has given Kellhus the power to manipulate the uninitiated, a power he uses without compassion or remorse. Artfully written and demonstrating deep psychological penetration, *The Darkness That Comes Before* is dark, sometimes moving, and achieves moments of real horror. All but a couple of characters are unlikable, but Bakker's convincing psychology makes them sympathetic.

The world is more than a simplified rearrangement of Earth—it's as though Bakker took the history of Eurasia—the Byzantine Empire, Greece, steppe nomads, the great religions, the Crusades—and melded it all together into an organic and unique civilization.

And yet, despite its accomplishments—for which I would recommend trying the book—I could not like it. The plot moves slowly, interrupted for pages at a time while characters detail how epically tormented they are, and when it does progress, it is often as travelogue or narration of political maneuvers with little character development.

It was also dark without being interestingly dark. There is, after all, more to telling a great story than throwing in a lot of sex and violence. What great stories do that The Darkness That Comes Before does not succeed at is raising horror to the level of drama and tragedy.

Possible objectionable material: Bakker relies more often on statement or suggestion than graphic detail, but this is a book to avoid if you're squeamish, or prudish, or just prefer acknowledgment that life's not all meaningless horror.

(Reviewed by Ida Clinkscales)

Book Review: Fantasy
Declare
By Tim Powers

continued on next page

The year is 1963, and it has been almost fifteen years since former secret agent Andrew Hale left the secret service for civilian life. But now, the British SOE is calling him back to active duty to finish an operation left unresolved fifteen years ago, an operation with which the Russians are also involved, and an operation in which magic is an essential component: Declare.

Kim Philby, a former British agent who has now defected to the Soviets, is helping the Russians in a new approach to Mt. Ararat in Turkey, where dwell beings of unimaginable power that the Soviets hope to harness for their own purposes, the djinn. Hale is sent to stop them by joining the Russian expedition and using a secret magical weapon to destroy the djinn colony and thwart the Soviet plan.

Interspersed with the present day plot is another thread, consisting of Hale's upbringing, his induction into the British SOE, his first meeting with Elena, the Communist spy and lapsed Catholic whom he has loved ever since, and his first encounters with the supernatural forces that haunt the world.

You might have picked this up from the first few paragraphs, but *Declare* is excruciatingly hard to summarize. I just barely scratched the surface of the novel's complexity. The three main characters—Andrew Hale, Elena Teresa Ceniza-Bendiga, and Kim Philby—are all immensely complex emotionally and psychologically, and Tim Powers uses that to good effect. Subplots and subthemes abound. I definitely plan to reread it, if only to make sure I caught everything. Each of the main characters in *Declare* has secrets to be unfolded, and all three are profoundly affected throughout the course of the novel. Moreover, even the minor characters are faceted and given a great deal of ambiguity.

One of the most masterful elements in *Declare* is its portrayal of the supernatural: The djinn are more truly alien than anything I've encountered in my reading. Powers makes them strange and terrifying beings which are almost completely set apart from humans.

Powers, according to a couple interviews I've read, reads far more literary and mainstream fiction than he does fantasy, and it shows in his writing style: *Declare* reads like a spy novel with fantasy elements rather than a fantasy novel with spy elements. The writing, however, is fantastic-Powers is clearly a master, and he uses his abilities well in *Declare*.

Religious themes are also abundant: At the beginning of the book, before the prologue, Powers gives a brief quote from the Biblical book of Job: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare if thou hast understanding." This passage seems highly relevant to the content of the book; *Declare* is a novel of dark and powerful secrets, and how humans react to and deal with them. Catholicism is particularly prominent: Hale is a lapsed Catholic, his mother a former nun, and Elena was raised Catholic in Spain before she joined the Communist movement. The struggle between faith and disbelief, hope and despair is critical to these characters and, indeed, to the entire book.

Declare combines history, reality, and fantasy seamlessly, forming one of the best novels I've ever read. It's highly recommended.

Possible Objectionable Content: The depiction of supernatural entities is sometimes fairly disturbing, and one scene in particular features a chilling depiction of occult practices by the Soviets. There's also some non-graphic sexual material, including a reference to sodomy, and a good deal of swearing.

(Reviewed by Sean T. M. Stiennon)

Audio CD Review: Fantasy

Pastyme with Good Company and Culhwch and Olwen, A Tale of King Arthur and His Warriors

Performed by David Lee Summers

In two bardic Arthurian CDs, David Lee Summers wraps his Welsh-flavored English effortlessly around our ears. Both audio CDs include music that helps us travel through time to days of yore in the British Isles. Gallant knights perform their noble deeds, thrilling their ladies fair.

The first CD, "Pastyme with Good Company," opens and closes with lyrics by Henry VIII, sung by David

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and his daughter, Myranda. Three Welsh legends lie in between the tunes. "The Image of Mary, Tales of King Arthur and Wales" was inspired by the writings of Nennius.

"The Image of Mary" relates a new version of who the ladies Morgan and Guinevere really are to Arthur. Active knights, according to Summers's source, do not marry; Arthur passes off Morgan, his secret warrior wife, as his sister. Comrades-in-arms, they are often in each other's.

Guinevere, the Roman leader's daughter, is his trophy when Arthur is named "Pendragon" for his valorous service as a general. To him, at their first meeting, his betrothed resembles the image of the Virgin Mary on his shield. Their marriage is intended to keep Rome's armies from returning. Besides colorful descriptions of battle scenes, the author paints a realistic picture of interpersonal relations. All is done in good taste with a general audience in mind.

"Rhonabwy's Dream," based on a tale from the Welsh stories in *The Mabinogion*, is the second tale. Three of Arthur's knights are sent on an urgent mission resulting from vengeance and betrayal by a disappointed fourth knight. Forced to spend a rainy night in a mean hut, the Knight Rhonabwy, too restless to sleep on the filthy floor with the others, puts his bedding on the farmer's table. His fantastic dream leads him to discover a practical solution to Arthur's dilemma.

The third offering is "The Three Maidens from the Lake," a traditional Welsh folktale. Although a fantasy, it represents a chivalrous code of conduct. A lonely shepherd wins a fey wife and her rich dowry, only to lose it when he breaks his promise not to strike her without just cause. Yet she takes pity on him in his old age, and sends their three sons to care for him. This is a loving lesson delivered with finesse.

The second CD, "Culhwch and Olwen, A Tale of King Arthur and His Warriors," is a strange sort of love story. The lad, Culhwch, a cousin to Arthur, is urged at the tender age of twelve to woo and win a giant's daughter. Perhaps his regal stepmother does so to protect her own daughter's virtue and interests. Or perhaps she sees true nobility in her stepson, fit for the most beauteous (and unattainable) of brides.

The giant may be a big, ugly braggart, but his devoted daughter, Olwen, is just the opposite. Wanting the best for his child, the giant sets the love-struck lad a series of seemingly impossible tasks. Culhwch, whose story was first written down in the twelfth century, rises to the occasion by enlisting Arthur's aid, as well as that of his knights.

"Culhwch and Olwen," also based on *The Mabinogion*, shows the Welsh love of exaggeration and repetition. There is also a certain amount of silliness that will delight modern audiences, at least the way Summers presents it. Imagine a lordling so bold that he demands a haircut from Arthur himself. Such is Culhwch.

Abetting the long oral tradition is the Celtic styling of musicians Kevin Schramm and Nancy McCallion. Arthur's knights chase all over Christendom, and even beyond the British Isles, until the tasks are accomplished one by one. The music follows suit. A wild boar and his seven piglets figure prominently in the completion of the final tasks. The knights call on Arthur in the end to help them rid Wales itself of the porcine pests. The spirited music embodies that final hunt, and then the happy nuptials of Culhwch and his bride. David's musical lilt is wonderfully engaging, almost mesmerizing.

Both audio odysseys are available from: Hadrosaur Productions, www.hadrosaur.com.

Possible Objectionable Material: none

(Reviewed by A.M. Stickel)

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"Why are you here?"

"You are to the point, Mr. Frostrin. It's a Westerner's trait, but not one I disapprove of. My point is, why are *you* here?" He swept his hand around the attic room, but meant the city. "Most of your countrymen are long gone, yet you still linger. These are draining times for us all with our nations at war. Your love for the Tinween must be great to endure the enmity of the city." Hesh's eyes searched the other's face.

"You know very well that I can't leave since the embargo on exit visas last winter."

Hesh nodded in sympathy. "Life goes for the groin, eh?" It had become a common phrase in city life in recent months.

"And you say that I am unmarried? I *am* married and your racist lawmaking makes no difference in anyone's head but the bureaucrats'. I won't leave without my wife."

"Ah yes, the charming Sabrina Frostrin, nee Gulbi." Frostrin flinched at the name. Hesh leaned forward in his chair. "And Gulbi once again. Your marriage was annulled in the courts."

"Those inter-marriage dicta are a farce," spat Frostrin. "Neither Sabrina nor I recognize the ruling."

"And yet she is not here. You must come to realize that it is not up to you to recognize our laws; it is up to you to obey them. You are in control of nothing." It was true. They had been driven apart by the marriage laws almost twelve months ago and his wife had been taken from him. He had heard that she was stationed as a nurse at one of the field hospitals in the south, but had been allowed no personal contact since the annulment. The Tinween government had become increasingly intolerant of the rights of foreign nationals within their borders, especially those from territories directly involved in the conflict. Hundreds had disappeared or been forcibly deported, including many friends and contacts. He remained unsure as to why he had been spared. Hesh was still talking: "So it appears for the moment you must remain a guest in our wonderful but sadly threatened city. *Are* you fond of the Tinween, Mr. Frostrin?"

"I married one. I have lived here for thirteen years. The Tinween are a warm, creative and intelligent people. I just wish I could say the same for their leaders."

"Careful, Mr. Frostrin," Hesh warned, but his tone continued unchanged, "the jails are full of people with loose tongues."

Subsiding, Frostrin said, "You congratulated me on my ability to get to the point, but as yet have managed to entirely avoid yours. Am I to be one of the missing?"

"Good heavens, no," chortled Hesh. "The missing? Far from it. Anyway, such things are not recognized by the official census. No, I have come to ask for your help."

"My help? How can *I* help you?"

"Don't be obtuse, Mr.Frostrin. You've made no secret of your gifts during your time in our city. In fact, you have been very generous with them, and we are grateful."

"Really."

"Oh, yes. Honestly, it would frighten your mother just how much I know about you, Mr. Frostrin. Isn't that right, Uljeet?" Hesh looked over his shoulder and shouted toward the doorway, where he had left the door ajar. Clearly, he was not worried about eavesdroppers. Another man appeared, causing Frostrin to swear and sit back in his chair. He did not know this man as Uljeet. This man was Paulo, the barman who always served him at the Crossed Arms. Suddenly, Frostrin felt simultaneously violated and a fool. In retrospect, it was inevitable, but this had been the man he had moaned endlessly to in the weeks following Sabrina's departure. It all made sense now, the quiet barman polishing glasses and pouring for him as he talked. Lord knows what he had said over the last twelve months.

Paulo, or Uljeet, made a little mock bow for his benefit. "That's right, boss," he said.

"Meet your case worker Uljeet. You know, he's grown quite fond of you over your time together and regrets that he will no longer be able to serve your drinks, but I just needed to demonstrate to you, Mr. Frostrin . . . Anders, just how much we care about your welfare." Frostrin looked at Hesh and felt genuine fear for the first time. "We keep a very close eye on valuable people," explained Hesh, pushing a stray grey-black curl back under his cap. The reptilian smile flicked on and off again.

"So what do you want?"

"I think you may have guessed that already, but I'll set it out clearly so there are no misunderstandings. Your countrymen, as I'm sure you are aware, have momentarily taken the initiative in our regrettable conflict. They are currently readying themselves for an assault on the Tinween mainland. Very simply, we need a date and a location and we would like you to use your, uh, skills to provide them."

"So your famous Ghost networks have let you down?" jeered Frostrin. "That *is* a shame. And now you want me to betray my countrymen? It's absurd."

"We can check any information you provide with our other intelligence sources so that anything we get from you will just be corroborating evidence, nothing more. I'm a great believer in completeness, Mr. Frostrin, and all information is gratefully received. And your countrymen? What are they to you now? You left them behind years ago to come here. This is your home now, your future lies in Tinwa, and Tinwa's whole future could rest on what you decide here."

"If I say no?"

"I could merely inform you that if you refuse you will be shot. It is a method that has met with a degree of success in the past." Behind Hesh, Paulo smirked. Frostrin's attention flickered from one man to the other, but he could read neither. "However," continued Hesh, "in your case I've been authorised to throw in a little extra incentive."

"Sabrina," breathed Frostrin. He lowered his head until it almost rested on the desk. "She's here?"

"Don't get too excited. But it's possible a little family reunion could be arranged." Hesh paused. "One way or the other."

Frostrin looked up again. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, Mr. Frostrin, that it would be in everyone's interests if you cooperated."

"You must understand that what I do is not exact. The past and the future can be interchangeable, locations can be confused, mistakes made. Divining maps . . . what they show me . . . it is only a guide."

Hesh stood up from his chair and leant across the desk towards Frostrin, who recoiled at the harsh smell of the garlic broth on his breath. "Well in this case, it had better be a good one, for all our sakes," declared Hesh, raising his tone to a menacing rumble.

"There is no choice," said Frostrin.

"No."

"You know I have special requirements: a hand drawn map of the area to be covered crafted by a native of that area, the paper made from oak pulp, certain tonics, something physical pertaining to the region . . ."

"I know what you need. As I said, there's really very little we don't know, apart from how you get the results. The materials will be delivered to you within twenty-four hours. I'll be coming to see you again soon after that, so work hard, and don't forget… we're watching."

Hesh stood up and held Frostrin with his gaze for a long moment, then turned and walked

from the room. Paulo-Uljeet gave another of his mocking bows and followed. It was only then that Frostrin remembered to breathe. He let air out in a long sigh and pulled the damp shirt from the small of his back. The difficulty of his position hammered at him. He had been unable to find a trace of her in the maps, but that did not have to mean she was dead. He grabbed at the possibility of being with her again; his whole being was desperate for her just to be close, but demon paymasters were pulling them apart. He stood and went to the window. The street was empty, but he knew someone was watching.

* * *

The city of Tinwa was originally built into a large natural amphitheatre encircling a deep harbour bay, but had spread a way along the coast and back inland. The oldest buildings stood at the top of the slope overlooking the bay and, as Frostrin walked the cobbles, he occasionally glimpsed the view out to sea through the press of shopfronts and cafes. The dark backs of the islands in the Suldayn Archipelago brooded on the surface of the ocean like an advance force for the coming Union offensive.

Frostrin felt hostile eyes cast his way as he passed particular places and groups of youths as yet too young to be sent to fight. It was a symptom of the war. Increasingly over the last two years a few previously friendly establishments had refused him service and harsh comments were made of his light hair and green eyes. On occasion, he had been abused in the street. Tinwa's increasingly radical leaders and their agents, the secret police that infested every corner of the city, had successfully fostered a climate of hatred and suspicion, and not only of outsiders. Even the laughter of the families that were enjoying the mild spring weather on the benches set outside the delicatessens and patisseries seemed somehow forced. It was as if they knew that something terrible was coming and were laughing away their last days of peace. They were probably right.

Despite the hostility he had found in certain quarters, Frostrin still held on to much of the affection for the city and its people that had drawn him in lo all those years ago. Tinwa itself had a long and colourful history as a trading port and evidence of its past could be seen in the rich mix of architectural styles that sat side by side in its streets. Until the war, one could buy almost anything from across the world in Tinwa's markets and eat just about every dish under the sun. The people, now withdrawn and buffeted by both conflict and governmental oppression, still held on tightly to their dignity and to their style. The men would share whatever they had with a newcomer to a table and even in the midst of their frequent and fiery arguments humour still danced in their eyes. And the women . . . the women were beautiful.

Somewhere, a levee broke. His memory flooded with images of her; the sheen of her hair, the infectiousness of that husky laugh, the warmth of her breath on his face. She had been the one to pay the price for his nationality. The corners of his eyes stung and watered. On their last night together they had sat in the front room of the cottage they shared and clung to each other. She had screamed at the men from Internal Affairs who had hammered at the door with their warrants. He had been unable to stay silent with her anymore.

"Take this," he had said, thrusting a scrap of paper into her hand. "It's the name of a man that will help us. Write to him from wherever they take you. You mustn't say much, but mention my name and he will help you. We'll be together again, I promise. I love you, Sabrina." It didn't seem enough.

She had looked at him without understanding but had taken the note. "I love you, Anders.

We cannot allow it to end here. I love you." And then she was gone. Was she still alive? Had she gotten out?

Hesh had slashed open a wound that had only barely knitted over. Frostrin fought to regulate his breathing and let go of the object in his pocket.

He headed out from the jumble of the Old Town and into the newer districts set back from the docks. From here he could see the formidable ramparts that protected the city. The Tinween government boasted that it had used a million tons of poured concrete in the construction of the city's defences. The curve of the natural harbour was now built up into a tremendous grey emplacement that dominated the city and cast its shadow over entire districts. It was studded with anti-aircraft batteries and watchtowers, and in times of attack an immense gate could seal off the whole city from the sea. The Tinween believed it to be impregnable. Frostrin, who remembered the Tinwa that had greeted him when he had first come to live here, saw its wartime transformation as a tragedy. He thought that the changing attitudes of the once liberal people towards him frightened them almost as much as they did him.

He entered the business district, occasional target of the Union's long-range bombers and paradoxically the location of his destination. It was Sunday morning, but the bells had stopped ringing for the moment and Frostrin could hear his own breathing as he turned into a quiet street lined with offices.

At the end of the street was a small church of the relatively obscure denomination, at least in Tinwa, to which Frostrin showed his allegiance. He made a point of coming here every Sunday and had done so throughout his time in the city.

He stepped through the door into silence. The church was lit solely by candlelight and Frostrin stood for a moment while his eyes adjusted to the gloom. There were a number of other worshippers scattered in ones and twos about the twin rows of pews. An old woman kneeled almost prostrate before the altar, lips working incessantly. Occasionally she emitted a low sob, perhaps for a lost son. Sunlight spilled through stained glass at the far end and fell onto the raised altar and devotional drinking bowls. Candles lit by each individual worshipper earlier in the morning stood together in bonsai gardens of light inside a small open grotto, set into one wall.

Frostrin selected an unoccupied pew toward the middle of the church and sat down, hunched forward with hands clasped. His thoughts did not turn to the divine but returned to the maze of potential scenarios inspired by the previous evening's conversation. Frostrin had worked through the permutations over and over during a sleepless night and they still would not leave him alone today. How much did they know about him? How much did they understand about his gift? How much information did they already have on the planned invasion? Was Sabrina alive? Lord, he desperately wanted to believe it. Would he be allowed to see her? Was she alive? Was she alive? Was she alive?

Finally, he stood and walked to the grotto that shone with dozens of candles, uniformly white and partially burned down. The air here smelled thickly of their incense. There was a stack of unused candles in a bucket shelf on the wall. Frostrin stood before it and without looking around whipped his own candle from the pocket of his jacket, masking the movement with his body. It looked identical to all the rest. He lit it from the flame of another burning wick and set it among the others, where it began to burn down. Frostrin watched until the first globule of wax formed around the wick, turned and walked from the church.

After a few seconds, a man got up from one of the benches at the back and followed, nodding to a second man who had slid into the church behind Frostrin on his way out. After a

short wait, the second man also left.

The church returned to silence. The silence stretched until the bent old woman who had been deep in prayer throughout Frostrin's visit rose creakily to her feet. With a bubbling cough and a hand pressed to her kidney, she shuffled towards where the candles burned. One was taller than the others. She gingerly picked it up, shaking it free of wax, and ran her thumb over the rough coded indentations that had been cut into the bottom of the shaft. Then she set the candle down again and left it to melt.

* * *

The pub was quiet ahead of the lunchtime rush. The work at the docks never stopped, even on Sundays, as the yards were frantically struggling to repair the battered remains of the Tinween fleet. A few wizened and committed drinkers sat by themselves at tables roughly made from the stripped timbers of dead ships and stared to their own private worlds, wordlessly moving their lips and marking out arcane patterns with the waltz of their beer glasses.

A fat man dressed in a loose-fitting, white merchant's suit came in and walked quickly toward a table in the far corner, his leather slippers kicking through miniature drifts of sawdust. His face was flushed and his forehead was beaded with sweat, which he dabbed at with a silk handkerchief. A dark cap of hair was cut close into his scalp. The man at the table watched him come. He wore the coarser clothes of a docker and a grey-black curl had escaped from beneath his corduroy cap. His small black eyes roved over the new arrival as if hungry.

"You're late," said Hesh to the fat man as the other pulled up a seat with a scrape that made Hesh wince.

"Sorry about that, Colonel. I was . . ."

"Don't call me that here, you fool," Hesh hissed. He looked quickly at the few faces scattered round the place, but saw only lethargy and resignation. The only flash of colour came from the red scarf at the neck of the publican who prowled behind the long bar. Hesh signalled her with a wave and turned back to his companion. "You're not really cut out for this sort of thing, are you, Tulla? That suit is hardly an exercise in understatement, especially with things so tight in the city."

The man named Tulla shrugged big shoulders. "I couldn't function in that scratchy peasant's costume you so lovingly affect. It would restrict my effectiveness, and my circulation."

"Really. Well, we can't have that, can we? Listen, I want you to do something for me. There is a woman who was placed last year in one of the munitions factories working in the mountains. The name is Sabrina Gulbi and I need her returned to the city. Quickly."

"She's in one of those internment places? Nice."

"You use unpleasant terminology, but yes."

"Documentation…?"

"…Will be arranged and made available at the usual drop. You are to do it personally. I don't want one of your thugs damaging the goods in transit."

Tulla made an affronted expression but nodded. "No problem. This wouldn't have anything to do with your little pet fortune teller, would it?" he enquired by way of retribution.

"How the hell did you know about that?" sighed Hesh.

The fat man smiled widely, revealing an ostentatious gold molar. "It is one of life's great paradoxes, comrade, that intelligence workers love to talk." He laughed softly. "And I have big ears. He's a Unioner, isn't he? And even worse, a Handurchan! I don't know why you don't just

shoot him, throw his body in the sea, and save us the trouble later."

"That's because," began Hesh and stopped as the bartender set two pints of frothy beer before them. Hesh smiled up at her as Tulla reached thirstily for his glass. Hesh leaned forward. "That's because you are an appalling little racist, Tulla, and it also displays a staggering ignorance about the gravity of our situation. Do you know how much trouble we are in? The Union is massing a full invasion fleet and their war machine makes ours look like a decrepit grandmother. Our air cover's in tatters, our fleet was badly harried in the withdrawal and worse, we haven't had anything reliable from the networks in months. Their counter-intelligence has castrated us. You better worry for your fancy clothes, my friend, because our only hope is to mount a strong enough defence to send them running back home, and that depends on the fortune teller."

"Well, I think it's pure madness to wager the whole of Tinwa on the divinations of some Western mystic. Surely you can't trust him."

"Of course I don't trust him, but you must understand that we are almost out of options. We *need* that information. If this attack isn't repelled, the war will be over in weeks, so I need you to do your job. Get his wife back here and we'll use her to turn the screws."

"Ah. Is he co-operating now?" Tulla had lost some of his initial ebullience.

"So far. I think he will. I don't think he's a strong man although he likes to talk the talk, but I respect his abilities."

"A load of hocus-pocus if you ask me." Tulla harrumphed, slurping noisily at his glass. "How does he say it works?"

"He doesn't. Maybe he doesn't know himself, but I'll tell you this—it's a genuine gift that comes along once in a generation. It's not undocumented. He successfully averted a potential disaster at the Falreep refinery and predicted those mudslides in Bantikar Province. Remember those? He pinpointed to the very slope the position of a downed military transport in the Eastern Ramparts. There are books of his predictions, suppressed now of course, and it's amazing stuff. I really believe he can help us."

"But he's never actually got directly involved in the war effort before, one way or another?"

Hesh shook his head. "He buys and sells his maps, draws his maps, reads his maps. The man's had a very quiet war up to now, thank god. I wouldn't want him working for the other side."

"It still sounds like insanity," said Tulla. "I can't believe it's come to this."

"Believe me, it has."

"Well, I'll get the girl for you if that's what you want. You want me to look after her for a while when she's back in Tinwa?"

"Yeah, that might be a good idea. Put her in one of the safe houses away from the danger districts so we don't have any accidents."

"Are you actually going to let him see her?"

"Probably not. It depends, but it's always wise to keep as many roads open as you can." Hesh took a long draught of his beer and stood up. A few workers were already beginning to filter into the tavern, although it was still early. He tucked the stray curl back beneath his cap and straightened his jerkin. "Let me know when you've got her." He left Tulla at the table. The fat man reached across and poured the remains of Hesh's glass into his own.

Outside, the shadow of the city's battlements crawled across the bay.

* * *

Frostrin returned to his single attic room to find Hesh poking through the mounds of maps that filled his shelves. Anger flowered and then died as the Ghost turned to greet him, the dark gaze fluttering about his person.

"Mr. Frostrin! I hope you don't take offence at my curiosity. There are some valuable antiques here, I'm certain, and some very fine renderings in your own hand. Very impressive."

"Thank you," replied Frostrin stiffly.

Hesh indicated a package wrapped in string and brown paper sitting on the desk. "I hope everything you need is in there," he said, taking a seat on the narrow bunk that occupied one corner of the room.

Frostrin pulled at the string and quickly unwrapped the parcel. It contained a rolled up map of the coast fifty miles on either side of the city, newly copied onto fine-grained oak pulp. The map was accompanied by an odd assortment of flotsam: pebbles, pieces of wood bleached and smoothed by the sea, some dried kelp, a battered shoe, and a faded road sign.

"We collected what we thought would do from along the coast. I hope it's enough," Hesh said, the tone of his voice making it clear that it had better be.

Frostrin slowly picked through the objects, running his fingers over each in turn. He nodded. "This will do," he said.

"Good. Do you have everything you need now, then? You can make the divination? Do you call it a divination?"

Frostrin shrugged. "It's as good a word as any. It's the results that matter."

Hesh switched on a smile and got up from the bed to come and stand beside the other man. "I'm glad you see it that way, Mr. Frostrin, I really do." He picked up one of the pebbles and weighed it in his hand. "I must confess to being fascinated by your art, but I'm afraid that my peasant's education means that the processes may well be beyond me. Will you begin tonight?"

"I'll make a preliminary reading, if you wish."

"Oh, I wish, Mr. Frostrin. I appreciate your need for privacy, so I'll leave you to it for now. But I'll look in on you from time to time. I don't need to stress again the urgency of what I want you to do."

After he had gone, Frostrin spread the map out across his desk and weighed it down at the corners. The coast of Tinwa Province was protected by long cliffs broken by a series of bays and beaches, several of which would make good starting points for a sea-led invasion. A frontal assault on the city of Tinwa itself, with its formidable defences and sea gate, made it an unlikely target.

Frostrin let air escape slowly from between his teeth. He had never used his gift as a tool of war, or of other people. It was one of the few principles that the war had not yet managed to corrupt, but now circumstances were forcing him along a difficult path. In a sense, this was not a betrayal of that principle, for the dice had already been cast to a degree, but he still felt he was being dirtied by the chicanery of two powers. The promise of Sabrina muddied his mind further. Could he do what was asked of him?

He rolled up his sleeves and reached for a drawer in the desk. He brought out two colored bottles of fluid. He poured a little of the first on to a tissue and rubbed it gently across his temples. This done, he poured a little from the second bottle into his palm and rubbed his hands vigorously together. He touched each of the place-pieces in turn for long moments. Then he sat back and began to breathe deeply and regularly to clear his mind. Eyes closed, he finally leaned forward and placed his hands on the surface of the map.

* * *

The following day, Hesh passed the formidable bulk of the Office of Internal Affairs, its walls populated by a gothic menagerie of gargoyles. Black-uniformed officers skittered up and down the steps on official errands. He walked on and entered an adjacent and more understated building through a side entrance, then followed an underground passageway that connected the two.

His infrequently visited office smelled strongly of fried food, and there were chicken bones in his waste paper basket. Tulla was squeezed into the seat behind the desk.

"What the hell are you doing here?" demanded Hesh. "Shouldn't you be detaining young ladies?"

"It's my most fervent wish, Colonel, believe me. However, I've got some bad news. The woman, Gulbi?"

"Yes?"

"She's gone."

"How can she be gone? We placed her in that factory ourselves. She can't be."

The fat man nervously dabbed at his forehead. "No, she disappeared from the place about six weeks after she arrived, not been heard of since."

"Well, wasn't there an investigation? People don't just walk out of there when they want to."

"Not much of one, I'm afraid," Tulla admitted. "Those places have hundreds of people coming and going at any one time, people dying. Their bureaucracy is a shambles; it's impossible to keep track."

"Is she dead?"

"I've no idea. Maybe. She just disappeared."

"She can't just disappear!" exploded Hesh, finally losing patience. "You had better get looking for her fast, or it won't just be chicken bones in the garbage."

"My men are already searching, Colonel. We're doing our best."

"Get out!" Hesh yelled. "Get out of my chair and get out of my office. I don't want to hear from you unless you find her. Understand?"

Tulla fled.

Hesh slumped in his chair. "Damn."

* * *

Like a bomb, he fell from the sky. The air screamed around him and an infernal heat burned at his back. He tore through clouds of smoke, and the clouds ripped back at him. They seemed now to be made from blades, cutting long incisions in his body. He screamed. He was opened up by the murderous vapours, slashed at and dismembered. Great lumps of somehow bloodless flesh were cut from his plummeting body and left behind. Bones gleamed through tattered shreds of skin. The last of his flesh fluttered away on the pulverising wind. The screaming skeleton of Anders Frostrin began to lose cohesion. His feet, hands, shins, arms, thighs, ribs, sternum, collar bones were all exploded in a dozen directions. He watched as a wind-blasted skull, jaw working in a final agony, tumbled away, diminished and was gone.

The clouds parted and whatever was left, whatever bubble of consciousness remained,

continued to fall. The earth lay before him, spread out like a map on his table. The ocean, blemished with the islands of the Suldayn Archipelago, licked along the coast. There were patchworks of fields and areas of devastation where the Union's might had fallen. Mountains rose in the east; towns were scattered across the country. The land grew and the pain receded.

Somewhere below lay a whirlpool of human emotion, stirred torrents of fear and agony, triumph and desolation. He was sucked inevitably toward it, a spider in a bath. The detail of the Tinween coast was swallowed by proximity. The ground rushed at him like a fist and there was a moment of blackness.

He stood in a street drained of color. This was not the disguise of deep shadow, for everything was in sharp relief. The world for Frostrin had become a negative photograph, made only of sharp blacks and whites with sharply delineated borders. Then someone pressed play on the projector and the photograph animated. The sky inland was full of falling shapes like pestilential blossom. There were screams and gunfire, the wail of sirens, the boom of artillery. There were bodies in the streets and terrified faces behind windows. Armed men broke down doors and filled rooms with bullets.

A jeep rushed along the street towards him, a machine gun mounted in the back. The gunner's face was set in fierce concentration as he fired indiscriminately at running men. The vehicle bore down on Frostrin, closer, closer, and then was racing off down the street behind him. Wheels screeched and it disappeared round a corner. Filled with horror, he moved downhill away from the fighting and towards the sea, but even here there was no respite. Explosions obliterated buildings along the seafront in detonations of black and white. Frostrin looked up. He knew this place.

Everything stopped.

* * *

"Frostrin! Frostrin! Wake up!"

"Sabrina?" he slurred around a swollen tongue. A glass of water was pressed to his lips. He swallowed painfully and tasted blood.

"Afraid not, Mr. Frostrin." There was a pause and the sound of the glass being set down. "You look like hell," said the voice. "You must have bitten your lip."

Frostrin opened his encrusted eyes to see the dark figure of Hesh standing over him. He lay on the narrow bunk in his apartment. Hesh tossed him a damp cloth. "Clean yourself up."

When he was ready and able to sit up on the side of the bed, Hesh dragged over a chair and sat with him. "That was quite a performance," he said. "It's Tuesday night and you've been out for nearly forty-eight hours. We thought something had gone wrong when you collapsed across the desk. You gave your head a real clout. Are you always affected that way?"

Frostrin reached up and tentatively explored the swelling at his temple. He winced. "Sometimes. It is not always an easy process. I want to see Sabrina."

"I don't think so. Not just yet," replied Hesh smoothly. "I need the information first. Did you get it?"

Frostrin hung his head. "I know where they will attack."

"Well then?"

"I need to know if Sabrina is here. You said I could see her."

"Don't worry. You'll see her. Look, I have these to show you." Hesh reached inside his jerkin, which had grown dirtier since their first meeting. Come to think of it, thought Frostrin,

the man himself looked worn out. Hesh unfolded some official papers he had brought with him. "This is Sabrina Gulbi's official release form from the voluntary war workers factory where she was employed. These are the travel documents I signed to get her to the city." Frostrin learned for the first time that Hesh was a colonel. "So you can see she's in good hands," Hesh continued.

Looking up, Frostrin regarded the other man. The thick Tinween lips twitched in a reassuring smile, but there were heavy bags beneath Hesh's eyes. The eyes themselves, for once, were still. They looked steadily back at him, and it was then that he became convinced that she was dead. Hesh was trying, but the practiced dispassion was gone. Frostrin looked away again.

"Have you nothing to say?" Hesh asked.

"I'm glad she's safe."

"Good. So can we continue with our business. Were you successful?"

Frostrin nodded dully. "I was. I have a place. What I saw . . . it was bloody."

"War is never anything else, Mr. Frostrin, but it is where we are. The name."

"They will land at Dungalowday Bay. Thousands of them."

Hesh massaged his chin slowly and his eyes narrowed. He looked at Frostrin's broken posture and seemed satisfied. "Dungalowday Bay. It makes sense. Yes, that makes sense. It's less than a day's march from the city and the sea is shallow there even if they come at low tide. And it's not as well fortified as some of the other bays along the coast. Very well, I'll have the village there evacuated." Frostrin said nothing.

"Do you know when it will happen, Mr. Frostrin? What day?"

"Times are much less certain, Colonel Hesh. I can't be sure of any particular date."

"Can you estimate? Remember your wife, Mr. Frostrin. Remember the lives you could save, on both sides. If the attack is repelled, it could mean a standoff that could last indefinitely. Do you know when?" Frostrin's body shuddered, whether in grief or pain Hesh could not tell. "Do you know when?" he repeated.

"I'm not certain, but I would say you have no more than two weeks." Frostrin's voice was empty of emotion, as dead as stone.

"Thank you," whispered Hesh.

When the colonel was gone, Frostrin, diviner of maps, staggered to the tiny sink set in the wall by the bed and retched in great dry heaves. Acid burned in his stomach, but he had not eaten enough to vomit properly. Tears rolled from their ducts to wet his face and would not stop. He wept for the Tinween he had seen in the vision and he wept for Sabrina, for she was surely gone. If she was not, then he had just killed her.

* * *

Frostrin spent agonisingly slow days alternately brooding at his desk and twitching the curtain over the window. The streets of Tinwa, even those in the Old Town, were full of uniformed activity as men and provisions were shifted in preparation for the rumoured invasion. He balefully searched the maps of Tinwa Province for visions of Sabrina, but could find no trace of her, and his mood darkened further. But he dared not probe again at the place where he had seen and felt so much pain. Never had it been so bad, and he had no desire to experience it again.

Twelve days after he had spoken with Hesh, he had a visitor. Did they teach them to knock that way in Ghost school? It was his former barman, the man he had known as Paulo.

"Hello, Anders," he said with his customary mocking bow. "Colonel Hesh has requested your presence. You' re to come with me."

"Now?"

"Now."

"You know, I don't even know what to call you."

The man laughed softly. "I've been a lot of people in my time, but use Uljeet if you need a name." Uljeet led Frostrin down the narrow wooden steps of his boarding house and out into the street where the sky frowned at them through a mask of heavy clouds. A black staff car waited around the corner and Uljeet motioned that Frostrin should sit in the passenger seat.

"Where are we going?"

Uljeet smirked. "You should know that already, soothsayer." He drove them in silence out of the old town and through the newer residential and business districts. Frostrin closed his eyes until they were out of the city and travelling along the coastal road. In time, the car passed signs for Dungalowday Bay.

Hesh stood among the hastily put together fortifications beyond the beach. Lines of heavy guns stood sentinel on the headland overlooking the bay, the bulk of which had been transported up from Tinwa in the last few days. Dozens of concrete gun emplacements had been set among the dunes and in the small fishing village, now evacuated, that huddled behind a meagre fleet of trawlers at the water's edge. A whole new city of encamped troops had sprung up just inland from the coast and their cooking smells drifted over the front.

"Mr. Frostrin, thanks for coming," said the colonel unnecessarily. The skin of his face was tight with worry, the ever-wandering eyes mapped with red blood vessels. He was in full uniform. "I wanted you to be here. It appears you were right. Our spotter planes have sighted the Union fleet steaming this way. It's a daunting force, all right, but I think what we've done to reinforce the bay should be enough. We owe you much."

"Don't say that until it's over. You want me to witness the consequences of my own betrayal, is that right?" Frostrin replied coldly.

"Come now, there was no intentional cruelty, Mr. Frostrin. I thought that the two of us had built up a rapport over the course of our acquaintance. I wanted the company."

"I would prefer the company of my wife."

"Not possible at the moment, I'm afraid. I've been busy with other matters, as you can imagine. But rest assured, you'll be reunited after we've successfully seen off your countrymen."

Yes, in the grave, thought Frostrin.

Uljeet walked up and whispered in Hesh's ear. Hesh immediately held up the binoculars that hung round his neck and slowly tracked them back and forth along the horizon, fiddling irritably with the focus as he did so. Frostrin watched as a formation of Tinween fighters roared out to sea.

"They're going to engage the fleet," Hesh remarked without looking up at them. "It's a suicidal mission; we're no match for your lot in the air. But they might do some damage. The real fun will start when they try to land. That, my friend, will not be pretty."

They waited in silence. An otherworldly hush had fallen over the bay and it amazed Frostrin that such a concentration of men and war engines could exist in such a bubble. Even the gulls had stoppered their cries. Then somewhere along the line a whistle broke the spell. "That's them!" exclaimed Hesh. He pulled the strap of the binoculars over his head and passed them to Frostrin. On the horizon, below the glowering cloud cover, there appeared a tiny black speck, then another, and another, until a black line was stretched across the ocean. Hesh breathed in. "It's immense."

The Union fleet approached inexorably for long minutes, the ships slowly acquiring

individual definition as they came: destroyers, cruisers, gunships and dozens of troop carriers forged through the water straight for Dungalowday Bay.

And stopped.

Uljeet, who was obviously receiving regular radio reports, once again came to whisper urgently in the Colonel's ear. "They're just sitting there. Full stop. What are they doing? Taunting us?" He spat on the ground and threw an accusing glare in Frostrin's direction.

Still the Union fleet sat out to sea and waited. There were nervous rustlings among the ranks of Tinween defenders as rumours flew.

Then, over the radio, the news came through. Uljeet's face looked disturbed as he passed it to his superior. Hesh snatched the binoculars back and turned them along the coast, back in the direction of the city. He flung them down in disgust and turned on Frostrin.

"Tinwa is under attack. Thousands of paratroopers dropped from the back of long-range bombers, behind the city's defences. They're running riot in the streets." He waved a hand out to sea as realisation dawned. "Half of those troop carriers are empty: this was all a set up. We had no idea you had this capability."

Frostrin met his stare. "Neither did I."

"You expect me to believe that, Frostrin? You're an agent, aren't you? You have systematically lied to me and betrayed your adopted country. I've been such a damned fool."

Behind them, there was frantic activity as infantry piled on to trucks heading back toward the under-defended capital. The Union fleet would never have been able to breach the city's sea defences; that was true. But an under-garrisoned city attacked from behind and from the sky? That was different. The war would turn today.

Hesh appeared to calm himself and turned back out to sea. "So the map divination, all that stuff. Was it all a fake?"

"No, not a fake. It's real. I just gave you the wrong information. Tinwa was always the target. Taking the city quickly is the only way to win. Our long-term planners have thought that since before the war even started. It was just a matter of timing, and I gave the Union a time and a place ahead of time. Then I simply repeated them to you. Think of today as predestination. You see, I never used my ability to directly intervene in the war; I just used your desperation to believe in it."

The colonel nodded his head ruefully. "I was desperate to find a way out for us and I thought you were it. You have played the game well, Mr. Frostrin. You have played *me* well. But you were so convincing when I saw you after the divination. You looked as if death had paid you a visit."

"He had. I saw what was to happen in the city. It was awful, but I still had to do my duty for the Union. I had to continue with the misdirection, and it lies heavily."

"You're a cold bastard, I'll give you credit for that. To do that knowing your wife's life was in the balance. I could still have her shot, you know, even now."

Frostrin snorted grimly. "Now who's bluffing, Colonel? I believed at first that I could get her out, but I know she's already dead. I could see it in your face when you showed me those fake documents."

Hesh turned his head sharply. "You think she's dead?"

"I imagine she was executed soon after she was taken away from me," said Frostrin bitterly, "or worked to death in one of the camps."

"Actually, I don't know if she's dead or not. She disappeared from her work last year and my agents, such as they are, have been unable to locate her. I'll admit I had to lie to you about

that to ensure your cooperation, or so I thought," Hesh concluded. "Maybe she did get out."

Frostrin brooded on that for a few long seconds and dared to allow a flicker of hope to burn. Eventually, he turned to Hesh and said, "So what now?"

"I should shoot you where you stand." But any anger was gone from his voice.

"And then, when your leaders get hold of you, they will shoot you as well."

"In all likelihood," Hesh agreed. "Two more casualties of our own, quieter, brand of war, eh, comrade?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps we can wait and see what happens in the city. I think things will be different after today."

The two men stood and looked out to sea. The Union fleet still waited in the distance, a long threatening line among the waves. The rumble of artillery rolled softly from the direction of the city and a cold wind blew across the beach. It started to rain.

The End

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easily.

A voice came out of the dark. "Looking for someone?"

Jax turned, startled. There, in a booth he hadn't even noticed, far from any light source, was a single being. But the voice–the voice was right.

He dropped his hands down to caress the jeweled butts of his pistols. "Jalazar Flinteye?"

The shape nodded. "That's me. You're not here for a drink or a female."

"No. I'm here to kill you."

"You're more candid than most beings who want to do that."

"I'm better than them, too," Jax hissed.

The shape nodded. Jax's eyes had adjusted to the dark enough to make out his basic form and color–it was Flinteye, all right. Light colored fur, dark clothing, and empty black eyes. There was a faint hint of fangs and claws, too–but Jax didn't let that unnerve him.

"So," Flinteye said, "are you going to do it here, and make yourself pay for the clean-up?"

Jax found the mercenary's gaze unnerving. He stood rigid and held his head up, allowing his hands to loosen the pistols in their holsters.

"I can see you are," growled Flinteye.

He froze. Flinteye could see infrared–how could he have forgotten? This room must be like day to him with all the body heat in it. Jax wouldn't forget that twice.

Jax's hands jerked away from his weapons, and he slipped into the booth opposite Flinteye, in a place where Jax could see what his adversary was doing, but not the other way around. That would even things up.

"You're friendly for an assassin," said Flinteye, drinking from the glass he had in front of him.

"I'm a gentleman. I'll give you six hours to prepare."

"That's nice of you."

"You'll meet me on the Plaza of Tears after that time has elapsed, or the whole galaxy will know that Jalazar Flinteye is a coward who can't face a worthy opponent."

Then Jax stood up and started to leave. Behind him, he heard Flinteye chuckle and say, "Who is this 'worthy opponent'?"

"I am!" Jax snapped, drawing the attention of a few nearby patrons. "And someday the whole galaxy will know my name as they do yours!"

Suddenly, Jax heard noises behind him, and before he could react both his arms were locked against his body in an unbreakable grasp. He struggled, but was held tight by unwavering hands.

He heard the voice of a 'bot close to his ear. "Is this one threatening you, Jalazar?"

"I can take care of my own problems, Axten," Flinteye growled.

Jax cursed his lack of caution. Of course Flinteye would have his 'bot a little ways off, ready to defend him.

His arms were freed, but Jax didn't try to go for his guns. "Six hours, and if you have any honor, leave the 'bot home," he said.

Then Jax left, anxious to get back out into the light.

* * *

He visited a restaurant for a light meal and a drink, then went to a bathhouse to cleanse himself and his clothing before the duel. Finally, with half a standard hour to spare, he went

to the Plaza of Tears on foot with his ion pistols freshly charged. He wore the same clothing as he had earlier in the day. It was late afternoon, and sun's heat was beginning to fade. Truly an excellent time for a duel, with a cool wind blowing through the streets and the sky gradually darkening.

He didn't know how the plaza had gotten its name, but he had visited it before. Featureless cobblestones covered its hundred meter expanse, and in the center was a single fountain that, rather than spraying upwards, flowed gently over an elaborate and very abstract sculpture.

Flinteye hadn't arrived, and the sun sank lower. Jax checked his chronometer. Only a few minutes were left before the appointed time. He growled to himself, pacing around the fountain and glaring at the surrounding streets and towers. There were no pedestrians around–it was the perfect time for their encounter. Would that craven mercenary rob him of his victory?

The time Jax had specified came and went. Another half-hour passed, and Jax sank down onto one of the stone pedestals surrounding the fountain, balling his hands into fists. Frustration welled up inside him,

Then he felt a warm body at his back and a cold blade pressed against his throat. "Don't move, boy, or I'll have some cleaning up to do," Flinteye hissed.

"You! We agreed to a time, and you missed it!" Jax said, afraid to move his throat much because of Flinteye's dagger.

"I was here. You didn't say I had to be in plain sight, did you?"

"Scum! Now get your knife away and let's have a proper duel."

"Proper? You're even more of a brat than I thought. I've already won the 'duel'. You lost."

The word echoed in Jax's ears. Lost. Now a blade was about to plunge into his neck, a blade every bit as deadly as plasma when it was this close. Defeat.

"Very well, claim your victory," he said, trying to keep his voice from breaking.

"You really want me to?"

A moment later, Jax felt his pistols slipping free of their holsters. Then the dagger was lifted away. "Now get up," said Flinteye

Flinteye shoved him, and Jax scrambled to his feet. His ion pistols were both clutched in one of the mercenary's hands, and the other was aiming a heavy plasma pistol at his forehead. "Why did you want to kill me, boy?"

"There are bounties on your head."

"You don't need money if you can afford clothes and weapons like this. And the bounties aren't too serious–you can't be after me out of a sense of justice. Tell me why."

"I wanted people to fear me!"

"You've got a long way to go before they'll do that. You wouldn't scare a Sophite farmer."

Jax sank to his knees, shaking all over. He felt as though his universe had cracked and was now falling to pieces. "I would have been famous if I had killed you. Everyone would have known my name. Jax Callam!"

"You're wealthy? Maybe I could get a good ransom for you."

"Beyond the dreams of trillions. But what good is money, SEUs sitting in accounts, metal and gems from all across the galaxy, without a name? An earned name? Nothing!"

There was silence then. Flinteye seemed to be thinking, although he never stopped covering Jax with his pistol. Twilight was spreading over the Plaza of Tears. Ah, that name seemed appropriate now. Jax could feel sobs welling up despite his best efforts to restrain them.

At last, Flinteye spoke. "I've got a lot of options. I could kill you now. I could hold you for

a massive ransom. I could just rob you of what you've got and send you off without even enough SEUs to get off planet...."

He trailed off threateningly. Then he grunted. "Too much trouble. Go home."

"No! I'm nobody there–only money! I'm only a bag of money!"

"Instead of only a killer? Seems like a good trade-off."

Flinteye holstered his plasma pistol and got up. "Bye, Jax. Good luck getting back home. Don't try to kill any more mercenaries. You'll get worse luck next time."

His ion pistols were still on the ground. Jax lunged for them with a cry.

Just before he reached them, two bolts of flaring violet plasma struck them and turned the jeweled guns into heaps of smoldering wreckage. Scorched parts scattered across the plaza.

Then Jax knelt down and cried freely, no longer caring if anyone saw him. The golden cape weighed heavily on his shoulders, crushing him. Flinteye would have beaten him easily even if it had been a straight draw.

"Flinteye! You said I'd be just a killer–so what are you?" he howled

He turned. Those eyes–perfect black orbs–regarded Jax carefully. Then Flinteye said, "I didn't kill you, did I?"

Then he vanished down a side street without a backwards glance, leaving Jax huddled in the dust, shaking softly with his weeping. The stars rushed out overhead, sweeping up from the south to light the sky with a thousand pinpricks of brilliant light.

At last, Jax Callam stood and walked over the remains of his weapons. He went straight to the space port and chartered passage back to his homeworld on the next starship to leave Erbatess.

The End

Sean T. M. Stiennon's work has been published both online and in print. He won second place in the 2004 SFReader.com Short Story Contest, and a collection of his Flinteye stories is forthcoming from Silver Lake Publishing. Visit his author page at www.sfreader.com/authors/seanstiennon , and send him feedback at flinteye@gmail.com.

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Valdhor stood, glaring at him. Exultation shot through Alcandhor at having goaded his brother for once as they locked eyes.

"Alcandhor! Valdhor!" Saldhor rose to his feet. "Enough! Sit down, Valdhor."

Alcandhor's brother sank into his chair, strong jaw set. Alcandhor bored into Valdhor's grey eyes, unwilling to lose this battle. Valdhor finally looked down. Alcandhor drew in a breath at his victory, but his stomach turned as his father said, "It is recorded. Valdhor will retain his rank and votes as a Chief, but is not in line for ascendancy to Thane. And as was previously discussed, despite his rank as Chief, he is given a bounds at the northwest boundary of Pashelon province. So be it."

The pronouncement sank in as the Chiefs rose. Unless his brother sired a son, Alcandhor would be Thane someday. He trembled with fury. How dare Valdhor walk away from his duty to his clan and toss that heavy mantle off and onto him.

Valdhor met his eyes as he walked past him, a sneer on his face. Alcandhor clenched his fists, shaking. Wait until they were outside!

Once on the grounds, he grabbed Valdhor's jerkin. "How dare you!"

His brother backhanded him to the ground. "Lay not a hand on me."

He rose and dove headfirst at Valdhor, landing them both in the dirt. His brother not only had years on him, but had a more muscular, heavy build and was a wicked fighter. Alcandhor did not care.

He punched Valdhor in the face. His brother's fist rammed into his chin. Alcandhor's head snapped back, pain shooting through his jaw and neck. Valdhor grabbed him by the jerkin and lifted him. Both hands free, Alcandhor quickly punched with alternating fists until his brother threw him to the side.

Alcandhor rolled up. He kicked at Valdhor's stomach. Valdhor blocked and swung in with a counter-kick. Alcandhor rammed his forearms into his brother's shin, and then rained a combination of his own kicks. Valdhor swatted them aside.

Alcandhor ducked under a kick to the face and struck at Valdhor's kidney. Valdhor spun—pain exploded in Alcandhor's head and he tasted blood. He blocked a kick aimed at his face, then another. He missed blocking the next kick and doubled over in pain, the wind knocked out of him.

He gasped, unable to draw a breath. He forced himself upright, wincing, to see his brother's sneering face. He gulped in a breath and kicked at Valdhor's face then his mid-section. Valdhor blocked both and threw a thrusting kick, knocking the wind out of him again.

Alcandhor struggled up. Valdhor's foot flew forward. A crushing rush of pain smashed his face and he fell back into blackness.

* * *

"Son, what would cause you to do something so foolish?"

Alcandhor turned and stared out the window. His father would not understand. He would say he should have discipline and not let people control him. But he had not seen the smirk on Valdhor's face.

"Valdhor is being disciplined for going beyond defense in stopping you, but you set yourself up for censure as well, attacking a Ranger."

"I care not."

Saldhor groaned. "If I thought it would help, I would crack your hard heads together. Why

must you two be at odds?"

"He is the one who hates me," Alcandhor shot over his shoulder.

"Do not exaggerate—or use such a harsh word."

"'Tis true!"

"Your brother is...aloof," Saldhor said, "but he is not without feelings."

Alcandhor snorted. "He has plenty of feelings. All of them negative."

"Alcandhor!"

"I can sense. I know what he feels."

"Enough."

Alcandhor crossed his arms. "'Tis not fair. I wanted to study the things of the Ancients. To find a way to get the portal working, to—"

"Those things are not necessarily out of your reach. You need not give up your own studies altogether. But you must concentrate on preparing for Thaneship first."

Nay. I need not concentrate. I will not. I want not to be Thane.

His father's hand pulled on his shoulder, but Alcandhor remained still, arms crossed, gazing across the grounds.

"Son, I know this is disappointing for you. But remember, our clan is given to service, and that means sacrifice."

"But 'tis not fair!"

"Tell me where in the Law we have a guarantee of fairness in this life!"

Alcandhor clenched his jaw at his father's outburst, not mindful of the painful bruises. He glowered at the cheerful birds singing in the trees near the window and the leaves rustling in the sunshine. Such a day should be overcast. Dark.

A young bird hopped along the ground, its father nearby, calling encouragement as it hunted for food. Alcandhor's heart lightened and he turned to Saldhor. "He could marry. Have a son. Then I would not be Thane."

His father's lips pressed into a line. "You cannot depend on that. You must prepare in any case."

"But Rangers marry and have sons."

"Not all Rangers marry. And not all those who do have sons." Saldhor let his breath out in a slow exhale, his blue-grey eyes boring into Alcandhor's. "You must prepare to be Thane. You must study hard."

The intensity of his father's gaze caused a chill to crawl through his stomach. "You knew."

Saldhor's face grew bland and Alcandhor knew he had hit the mark. His father used that face only to hide knowledge when he had foresight and felt he could not share it.

"You have always known. You pushed me into Ranger training when I wanted to be a law-keeper of the sciences, saying I could do both. You pushed me to study the administrative laws, and have always urged me on in my fighting skills."

His father remained silent but his face gave the answer.

Alcandhor's hands squeezed into fists. "You see I will be Thane. Not 'perhaps' but as a certainty. Is this not true?"

"Son, even if I saw thus, I could not say." Saldhor put his hands on Alcandhor's shoulders. "Just study. Prepare."

Alcandhor twisted away from his father and strode toward the door. "'Tis not fair! 'Tis not fair!"

"Alcandhor—"

The slamming door cut off his father's voice. Alcandhor raced away. He could bear to hear no more.

* * *

Alcandhor huddled by the wall, wiping his eyes on his sleeve, ashamed that his anger brought him to tears. Stripling Rangers should be beyond such childish emotional displays.

Footsteps echoed up the stairwell. Alcandhor stiffened as the door creaked. *Hang it!* He thought the unused guards' chamber of the tower a safe place.

"Ha! Found you at last."

Alcandhor exhaled in relief. At least it was only Haladhon. Less than a year apart in age and raised almost as brothers, he and Haladhon were best friends. But he wished no company. "Go away," he muttered.

"Ah nay, cousin." Haladhon plopped down next to him, and Alcandhor turned his battered face away. "Stars, but your brother left his mark on you. Why do you let him goad you into fighting him?"

"You should have seen his face—gloating! He walks away from his responsibility and dumps it onto my shoulders and then crows about it, knowing I must now give up my dreams to ready myself for the day I become Thane!" Alcandhor smashed his fist on the stone floor, ignoring the pain that shot through his hand.

"Why did he give up heirship to Thane? 'Tis inconceivable—he has ever studied for it and declared he would be renowned as a great Thane in history."

"It is because of his beating of Marcalan. He knows our clan will not follow his leadership now."

"Aye. It has happened. As with Zadhras, the Seer's grandson. The clan deposed him for his younger brother. But cousin, do not give up hope. He could still marry and provide an heir." Haladhon chortled. "Assuming any lass would have him."

Alcandhor shook his head. "I said thus to Father, and he told me to not trust to that. He said he has foreseen things and that I must be prepared to become Thane. I think he has always known. Remember how he pushed me into Ranger-training?"

"Aye. It surprised me when you became a trainee."

Alcandhor stood and paced the chamber. "'Tis bad enough to be a Chief, but Thane—" He closed his eyes as the reality struck him, churning his stomach. "Stars, understand you what that means? To be leader not only of our clan, but to keep peace for our entire world? I am not strong as my brother is. How am I to take on such responsibilities some day?"

"Stars, 'Candhor, you are too serious. You worry about 'some day' as if it were tomorrow. Come with me and we shall see if we can wager off my priv chores to another stripling."

Groaning, Alcandhor jammed his fingers through his hair. "Are you ever serious?"

"I am very serious! Do you want my priv duty?" Haladhon straightened, eyes wide. "Stars! Future Thane scrubbing the priv." He threw his head back, laughing, and pointed to Alcandhor. "I just realized—one day I will bow knee to you as Thane. Shall I practice now?" He went down on one knee, head bowed as his arms spread in exaggerated reverence.

Alcandhor grabbed him by his jerkin, hauled him to his feet, and shook him. "'Tis not a jest, rogue! 'Tis a fact."

"Aye, 'tis fact. But at least see this humor in it—one day you will be Thane. Valdhor will take orders from you."

Alcandhor shoved his cousin back. “I want not to be Thane! Can you not understand?” He strode out, slamming the door.

* * *

With a groan, Alcandhor struggled up from the floor. Edhron tossed a drying cloth to him. “You still try to use strength against me. You have not the muscle yet. Speed, agility, leverage—those are your advantages.”

Alcandhor nodded, wiping his face and trying to catch his breath.

“We will match each day at this time. And I expect you to give me your best effort.”

A sickening twist tumbled Alcandhor’s stomach. He had always valued the free time between afternoon and evening meal as his one time to study what he wanted, without interruption. The forbidding expression on the elderly instructor’s face stopped his protest and he merely muttered, “Aye, sir.”

All through the training hall striplings and Rangers had stopped their matches to watch him be humiliated by Edhron. Warmth spread up from Alcandhor’s neck onto his face. He stifled a groan. Everyone would be keeping eye from now on when he trained, and would compare him to Valdhor. He had not known such scrutiny before.

Alcandhor headed across the huge chamber, eyes averted as feigned whispers reached his ears.

“A scrawny lad.”

“He is young yet.”

“He has not his brother’s fighting and tracking skills.”

“Aye. He has his nose in books more than hand on a sword, they say.”

A snort. “As long as he has more respect than Valdhor.”

“That does no good if he cannot fight.”

A small group of stripling Rangers stood to one side and Alcandhor approached, relieved to be with those his own age.

“‘Tis our future Thane,” called Monadhal. He swept into an elaborate bow. “You wipe the floor well with your face, cousin.”

Several other striplings chuckled.

“You try fighting Edhron full out—then laugh,” Alcandhor shot back, clenching his fists.

“Bells, your humor left the city when your brother did,” Monadhal said. “The basin is in the corner. Soak your head in the cold water until you find it again.”

Grinding his teeth, Alcandhor wavered on whether to give in and punch the smirk off Monadhal’s face. The striplings all seemed to hold their collective breath as the two glared at each other. Monadhal finally dropped his eyes, and feeling assuaged, Alcandhor stormed off. He took long, deep breaths once outside, letting the cool early evening air fill his lungs, but the mocking words and looks still stung.

A hand settled onto his shoulder. He started and turned. His uncle Lamadhel gazed down at him.

“What has you so troubled?”

Alcandhor averted his eyes, shrugging.

Lamadhel grasped the nape of his neck and gave him a gentle shake. “Say on, lad.”

Alcandhor licked his lips and blurted, “I would have been Second at Table to Valdhor if he had become Thane. Why does knowing I will be Thane instead of merely a Chief make such a

difference to them?" He gestured toward the training hall. *And to me?*

Lamadhel's eyes crinkled in a smile. "When you figure that out, it will no longer matter." He slapped Alcandhor on the back and walked away.

Alcandhor crossed his arms. Stars, he wished his uncle were less enigmatic.

* * *

Stifling a yawn, Alcandhor listened to Lasdhal drone on about provincial law. Staying up late to study En'ai, the common tongue of the Ancients, had been a mistake. But he had no other time for his own studies with his free time now wasted on fighting instruction with Edhron.

Alcandhor would not give up his own dreams. He needed En'ai to understand some of the books left behind by the Ancients. Books on physics. He would see that portal work again.

For now though, he had to keep awake. Logarithms—perfect. Flicking his eyes toward the elderly Ranger, Alcandhor surreptitiously lifted his quill and dipped it in the ink. As he wrote, Lasdhal's voice faded into a distant buzz.

The buzz grew and Alcandhor became aware of words. "...takes precedence when a dispute occurs across provincial borders?"

Alcandhor looked up, eyes wide. Lasdhal was glaring at him. He swallowed. The striplings had all turned to gaze at him. Heat crept into his face.

"Sir?"

"Have you any idea what we are discussing?"

Alcandhor chewed the inside of his cheek a moment and decided to be honest. "Nay, sir."

Lasdhal let his breath out in a slow hiss. "Go to the Thane and explain to him why you do not know provincial law. Be assured I will be speaking to him later as well, and he will not be pleased if your explanation does not match mine."

His face flaming ever hotter, Alcandhor gathered his books as the striplings snickered. Haladhon at least shot him a sympathetic look as he left.

Alcandhor groaned as he reached the Thane's chamber. It was late morning—his father would be at the training hall, matching. Stars, he would have to face his father in front of scores of Rangers.

Leaving his books on the study table, Alcandhor plodded along the back hallways and streets of the western range. Much easier to pass servants than cross the grounds and meet Rangers and kin.

Alcandhor crept in the door and stood by a pillar, gazing at the matching Rangers, most stripped to the waist. Staves cracked, and men's yells and laughter echoed throughout the huge chamber. The humid air hung heavy with the tang of sweat and spicy muscle balm.

The sight of his father's muscular back as he grappled with another Ranger caused Alcandhor's chest to swell with pride. A solid, powerful fighter. Valdhor took after him.

Alcandhor did not.

Scrawny.

He has not his brother's fighting skills.

A weight pressed Alcandhor's chest. He could never measure up. And his heart did not want him to. But dare he back away from Thaneship as his brother had done? The Thane's line had remained unbroken from the time they arrived on this planet. Leadership may not always have passed to the oldest, but it had stayed from father to son for over a thousand years. Would Alcandhor be the one to break that line?

The match ended, and as his father grabbed a drying cloth, his partner met Alcandhor's eyes over Saldhor's shoulder and leaned close, whispering.

Saldhor turned, frowning, and walked over. Alcandhor tried to meet his eyes, but could not. He stared at the white stone floor.

"Are you going to make me ask why you are here instead of in study with Lasdhal?"

"I...I was not paying attention."

"He sent you here for merely not paying attention?"

Alcandhor shifted from foot to foot. "Nay. I...I mean, 'twas not just today. I am bored and my mind wanders."

Silence. He looked up. His father stood, face grave. Alcandhor glanced at the strong arms crossed on the bare chest, and stiffened in anticipation of a thrashing.

"I see," Saldhor finally said. "Son, how long are you going to fight this?"

"Fight, sir?"

"You are resisting—nay, rebelling. Not actively, but passively. Think you I see it not? Is such an attitude worthy of a Ranger?"

Alcandhor opened his mouth, but nothing came out. His father was not going to thrash him, but merely talk?

The corner of Saldhor's mouth twitched. "A stripling Ranger carrying a heavy mantle such as the one just placed on you should be treated as an adult. Shall we discuss this then as two men, or shall I treat you a child?"

"How can I be treated as an adult when I am given orders as a child and have no say?"

"Think you adults do as they please and follow no orders? We have our duty, and 'tis not always pleasant. Think you I had a desire to be Thane? I was born in Ch'shalna clan and eldest son of our Thane. Had I a choice?"

"You could have chosen another profession. You have two brothers. Either Bardhor or Lamadhel would have made a good Thane."

"Son, understand you, the Maker has purposes in all He plans. I was born in this clan, to the family I was, so this is my purpose."

"But then Valdhor—"

"Your brother will not be Thane." Saldhor chewed his lip a moment. "I have foreseen it, son. He will not be Thane. If I had not had foresight, I would not have let him renounce heirship so easily. He knows this. Now you do too."

Alcandhor closed his eyes a moment, biting back his words. He dare not say it, but 'twas not fair.

Saldhor put a hand on Alcandhor's shoulder. "And I will tell you news before it flies about the city. Your brother has married."

"Married?" The stone in his stomach lightened. "Then perhaps—"

"Nay. I have already told you—"

"You said you had foreseen he would not be Thane. But perhaps he will have a son."

"Alcandhor, I cannot say on, but you must believe me when I tell you that you must study for Thaneship."

"But I want it not!"

"Why?"

The question hit Alcandhor and he stopped his rant, frowning up at his father. "Sir?"

"Why do you not want it? And I wish not to hear about the Ancients or your studies. Aye, your personal studies have to be set aside. For now. But as a Chief you would have many duties

as well and much studying in preparation. What is the real reason?"

Alcandhor shook his head and his father smiled. "When you know the real reason why, come back and we shall talk again."

Saldhor turned away, rubbing the drying cloth on his face.

"Father?"

His father swung back around and Alcandhor asked, "But what about Lasdhal? A-about not paying attention."

Saldhor hesitated, his expression pensive. He hooked the chain around his neck with his fingers and lifted the key over his head. "You have a more important assignment. Climb up to the Portal Complex. Sit amid the dust of the Ancients for as long as you wish, and think."

Alcandhor looked at the bio-crystal in his hand then gaped at his father. Saldhor would trust him with this? And let him to go to the place of his dreams?

His father waved his arm. "Go."

Grinning, Alcandhor ran out.

* * *

Alcandhor raced down the corridor and slid into his barrack hall. Haladhon jumped up from a cot, and breathed out in relief. "'Tis only you. How did you fare with the Thane?"

"Well. Worry not. What are you doing here?"

"Class ended. I am setting up a surprise for Andhrel. Wish you to help?"

Alcandhor walked over to the side of Andhrel's cot. Haladhon held up a small sack with a grin. "Sand."

"Sand? 'Tis not worthy of you, cousin."

"Have you a better idea?"

Alcandhor chewed the inside of his cheek, his mind working furiously. "Aye. Hold for a moment." He ran down to the barracks' kitchen, taking the white stone steps two and three at a time, hoping he could make it back before the other striplings came in.

He rummaged through a large sack of tubers, digging down until his fingers squeezed into something cool and mushy. He pulled out the mostly-rotten vegetable, wrinkling his nose at the smell, and hurried back up to his barracks.

No striplings yet. "How did you get here so far ahead of the others?" he asked Haladhon.

"I claimed I had to use the priv. It gave me a start on them," Haladhon said as Alcandhor set the tuber under the blanket at the foot of the bed. Lifting a boot, he smashed it flat, then smoothed the surface.

Haladhon chuckled, slapping Alcandhor's back. "I have missed you, cousin."

"You will have to keep missing me," Alcandhor said, straightening with a smirk. "Father is sending me on a mission."

"A mission? But what about Lasdhal and slacking in class?"

Haladhon followed as Alcandhor walked down the hall to the washing room.

"That is why he gave me this mission. He is sending me to the Portal Complex."

"The Portal Complex? Stars. 'Tis no punishment for you."

Alcandhor shrugged as he washed the putrid goo from his hands. "It is not a punishment."

"What are you to do there?"

"Think."

Haladhon's eyebrows rose. "Think?"

Alcandhor smiled. “Aye. Now let me grab a spare cloak and leave before Andhrel arrives.” He shook his hands to dry them. “And do not forget to tell me what happens when he sticks his feet in his bed tonight.”

* * *

Alcandhor gasped from running up the steep path. He tossed his long hair over his shoulders and stood in front of the Complex, bio-crystal key in hand. The craggy mountain rose before him. Only the smooth, black surface of the doors themselves gave away that anything lay hidden beneath.

How could his father reward him with this gift instead of punishing him? Holding his breath, Alcandhor approached the doors and set the key against the small indentation. They opened with a quiet *whoosh*.

Heart thudding, he stepped inside. Rounded grey-white walls rose to a domed ceiling. Faint illuminations emanated from tiny niches high above. Someday he would understand how the Ancients could capture and store light. What had he read? Something about photons being stored in a crystalline structure? He would have to study En’ai more thoroughly; if only the Ancients’ books had been translated to their language. But his people had shunned technology. Was that why the Ancients left—to avoid tempting his people with their advanced ways?

He had walked halfway across the chamber when he remembered the doors. He ran back and used the key to close them, his feet echoing on the polished floor. He turned back around and halted in realization—the floor had no dust on it. He had crept about in unused chambers within the city playing with Haladhon and others when younger, and always dust covered everything. But here it was as if a servant lived in attendance. Stars, he must discover how these things could be.

For now, however, he merely wished to explore. Three doors awaited him. From previous visits with his father, Alcandhor knew the center one led to a device the Ancients called a lift. These devices allowed the Ancients to travel through the Complex, but they no longer functioned. Although he knew it would be futile, he approached the lift’s door. It had no latch, no indentation for a key—merely a small square spot on the wall next to it. He touched it and it glowed slightly, but nothing else happened.

The door to his right would not open either, but the one to the left slid open as he neared it to reveal a hallway. Most chambers along this hall contained chairs, tables, and various bits of inexplicable equipment. Somewhere down this corridor a door led to a stairway that wound down into the bowels of the Portal Complex. Alcandhor found it and bounded down with anticipation.

* * *

Room after room, level after level of nothing. Alcandhor dragged back up to the Portal Chamber itself and sat down in the center of the floor, staring at the blank, circular frame.

What had it been like to see its swirling blackness and bright light and see someone appear from another world, or to enter it and find oneself in a new, strange place? Alcandhor’s heart thudded as his desire to reach beyond that frame sucked the breath out of his lungs. He groaned, dropping his head into his hands. How could one want something so badly that it hurt?

As he sat, Alcandhor realized the stillness about him. No noise save his own breathing. No life at all. Empty. As if a tomb. The Ancients gone.

Gone.

But—not forever. He would see that portal work. He would meet the Ancients. He would.

He jumped up and went to the control panel for the portal. His fingers touched the spot where the bio-crystal index key should be. If he had that, and could bring power to the frame, he could set the portal to any world, go anywhere.

Alcandhor fingered the key around his neck, knowing how silly it was to think his 'door' key could actually be the missing index key. But he had to try.

The key did not fit the shape of the port. With a sigh, he dropped into a chair. He touched one spot then another on the panel. Nothing.

A rumble from his stomach reminded him the day grew late. He opened his sack and pulled out the food with a grin. No journey rations for this adventure—he had stolen breads and meats from the great hall kitchen. If he were found out he would incur the wrath of the head cook, Kanille. Haladhon would be proud of his bravery.

After eating, Alcandhor wandered about aimlessly, examining room after room.

On one level he found bedchambers. Neat and clean with beds made, as if waiting for their owners to come in and rest. Tired and discouraged, he lay down on one of the beds to sleep.

* * *

The nothingness unnerved Alcandhor. Too quiet. After jumping a third time at an imagined sound, he threw back the cover and sat on the edge of the bed. He ran his fingers through his hair with a moan and winced—his voice seemed loud and unnatural.

He pounded a fist on the bed. What had his father sent him here for?

To think.

Stars, Alcandhor did not want to think about being Thane. His father's question came back—why did he not want to be Thane?

Because he wanted to be a law-keeper. He wanted to study the sciences and learn—

He fell back on the bed, the silence mocking his reasoning.

Truth.

At least to himself and out of respect for this place.

He feared not being as good a Ranger as Valdhor. Of being incompetent as Thane.

Valdhor succeeded at everything—he was marksman, stout fighter, uncanny tracker, and remarkable arbiter. No one doubted his abilities as a Ranger.

Valdhor's only lack was his inability to feel—even with the empathy he inherited from the Ancients. Would their clan follow a man so surly and arrogant? Perhaps they might have. He had a charisma despite his temperament.

But then he had lost control.

Granted, little Marcalan could be irritating, pulling pranks and making a nuisance of himself, but to beat the child—nay. Valdhor had thrown away Thaneship with that act. The Rangers had turned against him.

Yet they looked at Alcandhor as unworthy. Unproven. Aye. He had only been a stripling a year. Their eyes had grown used to seeing a hardened fighter as their future Thane. Now they saw—what?

What did Alcandhor see? He chewed the inside of his cheek. He saw himself hunched over, avoiding the eyes of Rangers. He saw a lad afraid of failure and afraid others would see his fear.

Alcandhor straightened with an angry shake of his head, pride of his clan swelling within

him. Rangers do not fear. Rangers persevere. Rangers find their strengths and exploit them.

His answer lay in that fact. Alcandhor could stay in Valdhor's shadow, or he could step out and not fear being seen for himself, and what he could become.

But did he have the fortitude and determination for that? Could he become a man that his clan would look to with pride and follow? What had he to recommend him? What strengths had he? Time for more honesty, without worry of pride.

His strengths...

Intelligence. Aye. The Maker had given him an ability to learn and understand that often surprised his elders, and caused some to mock him.

And he shared with his father and Valdhor one special trait. Being a child of the Ancients.

He lifted the chain from his neck and stared at the key glowing slightly in the dark. Although they referred to it as having 'Ancients' blood,' Alcandhor understood certain genes caused a bio-crystal key to glow when he drew near. Few in their clan could make that claim, but the Thane's line could. That fact had become a tradition to prove the right of Thaneship within their clan. And their clan's right as peacekeepers in their world.

Alcandhor twirled the chain, watching the glowing key spin. What abilities had he inherited? Had he foresight, as his father? Would he dream? He knew not yet. He only knew he could perceive surface emotions at times. Although with the turmoil of the last lunation or so, he had taken to blocking to hide his anxieties from his father; this kept him from being able to sense others as well.

Alcandhor rose, pulled on his trous, and padded to the door to find the small square that brought light to the room. There. The tomb-like quiet seemed less uncanny now. He paced, continuing his introspection.

As a Ranger, and especially as Thane since he would hear appeals, he must become a discerning arbiter. Learning laws of clan, province, conclave—those required mere study. But his decisions would affect lives. He must be not merely well-studied, but wise. And compassionate. Had he those traits?

Trainees and striplings asked him time after time to mediate when they had a dispute—usually over such dire things as who claimed whose dessert from a wagered match. His judgment had already earned him a reputation among his peers.

But what else?

His fighting skills. He grimaced, knowing they lacked. Always had. He had barely passed the tests to become a stripling Ranger. But Edhron claimed he held a lithe grace and coordination and that the elderly instructor could teach him to fight in ways that did not require the bulk of muscle such as Valdhor had. And Edhron would know, being of short stature and slight build. Yet their clan honored him as their toughest fighter.

If Alcandhor paid attention, he could learn from Edhron and become skilled. That would take much effort. Probably the most effort of all his training. But he could do it. He could.

He would have to face the scrutiny and taunts of Rangers and striplings. But he need not fear them. Stars, he would be their Thane. Who needed to fear whom?

Did he want to be Thane? Alcandhor shook his head in the dim light of the Ancients' bedchamber. Nay. But he would run from it no longer.

A smile tugged at the corners of Alcandhor's mouth. Tomorrow he would talk to his father.

* * *

Alcandhor strode across the grounds, shoulders back, meeting the eyes of Rangers. A few showed surprise and others approval. The few that met his gaze with scorn he glared at, hoping his expression let them know they would show respect to their future Thane.

Alcandhor walked past some of his fellow striplings as they matched with staves in the morning sun.

"Our future Thane," Monadhal said with a laugh.

Triumph shot through Alcandhor—the mocking did not bother him. Much.

Edhron called to him. "Your father said you were on a mission."

"Aye. I go to report to him now."

"You will return to train with us then?"

"Unless he has other orders for me, aye."

With a satisfied expression, Edhron nodded and turned back to watching his pupils.

Haladhon met his gaze with a wink, and Alcandhor grinned as he continued across the grounds.

The Thane's chamber door stood ajar and Alcandhor entered. His father and uncles sat at the table, discussing reports.

Saldhor put down the papers he held, his eyebrows raised with expectation. Lamadhel and Haladhon's father, Bardhor, both turned to look at him.

"You have your answer, boy?" Saldhor asked.

"Aye. And I am a boy no longer. I am a Ranger. And future Thane."

Lamadhel leaned back in his chair. "And the other Rangers?"

Alcandhor smiled, understanding now what his uncle had meant. "What of them?"

The End

A homeschooling mom, and a gramma, L. S. King taught martial arts for years, and currently coaches gymnastics. She lives with her husband and youngest child in Delaware.

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continued from page 34

Setting the lamp down, I opened the only drawer and went through the contents. Writing paper, quill pens, a tightly capped bottle of indigo ink, a stiletto-shaped letter opener . . . nothing sparked my memory. On impulse, I lifted out the drawer and inspected the bottom. Nil there too. The length and width matched the desk, so no hidden compartment. I ran my fingers around the sides, and just behind the drawer front, I perceived a curved indentation the size of a thumbnail. I pressed down, and a narrow piece of wood slid back, revealing a hollowed out area. Inside, I found a flat metal key attached to a leather thong.

I removed it. The metal looked fragile but did not bend when I tried to flex it. For some reason I had gone to a lot of trouble to hide this key. I slipped the thong around my neck in case I should recognize what door it fit as I walked through the palace.

I replaced the drawer and continued my inspection. Above the desk, rows of books peered down at me. I am fond of books in general and prefer history and military tactics in particular. One was not quite pushed in. I pulled it out and read the title: *The Art of War* by Sun Tsu. I didn't recognize the name. Flipping through the pages, I discovered two stuck together. Examining them closer, I decided the bonding appeared deliberate. The pages bulged slightly as though something was encased between them.

I laid the book on the desk and pulled the letter opener from the drawer. I gently inserted the tip between the pages and slowly pried the pages apart. A letter printed in a firm hand lay on the page.

Qweg—it began—*If you are reading this letter, dear brother, then you have made it back to Enion alive. I congratulate you on your survival skills. I would not have thought it possible for you to have endured. I have only one regret—that I allowed our common fraternity to stay my hand. I should have killed you instead of leaving you in Macbeth's incompetent hands. So be it. Know this: that open war exists between us, and the next time, I will not be so chivalrous.*

We are alike, you and I, in that we want the same things—security and pleasant surroundings. As long as you live, that will not exist for me and as long as I live it will not exist for you. I now know that you do not possess the Ixtlan Shuttle, so the game is still alive. Whoever gains the Shuttle first will win. I won't insult you with false expressions of good luck or good hunting. I only hope you do not succumb to the forces now besieging Enion, which I have unleashed, before I reach you. I wish for the pleasure of killing you myself. Until then—Merlin Skye, Lord of the Umbra.

I recognized the signature as the same as on the note hidden in my boot. Now I had proof that my brother was behind what happened to me and the beast armies attacking Enion. Rage boiled out of me. I pounded the desk and the light guttered as the lamp nearly overturned. I restrained my violent self. After a few moments, my anger burned terribly cold within me as I made a decision. Merlin could visit whatever he liked upon me, but Enion and my family were off limits. He had made a mistake for which I would kill him.

Pulling Merlin's other note from its hiding place, I placed it with the letter into Sun Tsu's book. Before closing it, I noticed the pages selected to make the envelope contained a passage on doomed spies—men given false information and reported to the enemy so that information would be tortured out of them. This set me to thinking. What if all that had happened to me over the past few days was some kind of set up, intended to make me believe my brother was behind everything? Someone might consider such an elaborate ruse in order to gain my confidence and possession of the Ixtlan Shuttle. Morgan Skye said that with the Shuttle and a Shadowloom, a person could control the Umbra. Power in that coupling was power enough to tempt anyone, even a niece perhaps.

I shook my head. It was too conspiratorial. Such thinking was a long shot at best. First of all, I didn't know where the Shuttle was; and second, if by some chance I did know, that knowledge was locked deep in my subconscious and there was no telling how much time would pass before I remembered it. Finally, the events of the past few days were more than a little girl could engineer alone.

For now, the simpler explanation still applied. These events were all happenings and consequences in a struggle between two brothers for control of the Tapestry Worlds.

I snapped the book closed and pushed it all the way into the book case. I let my rage seep a little bit into my body and enjoyed the strength it gave me. Merlin would not find me easy to kill nor Enion easy to destroy.

I pondered my choices. My immediate threat lay with Merlin on his Earth tapestry world Morgan had told me about. It seemed impossible, but somehow he had managed to enter my locked quarters and leave this message for me. I had to do something to throw him off balance and that meant taking the fight to him. After Enion's forces next met and defeated the beast army, I would make another lightning run through the Umbra, invade Tintagel, and leave my brother my own calling card.

For this raid I needed Morgan to get me past Merlin's defenses. Of course, there was the matter of finding her. This afternoon the Lieutenant reported that his men had turned up no trace of her in the city. I ordered him to expand the search to the countryside. I didn't believe that she had left Enion. The Umbra was too dangerous on foot and alone. I had the feeling she was waiting to find me at a time away from the palace. The first chance I had, I would journey through the countryside looking for her.

I also needed her for a long range plan I devised after watching the troops this morning. If she was right about using the Shuttle to control the Umbra, I hoped to use it to create a passageway for Enion's troops through those shadowlands for a final showdown with my brother. But I needed Morgan to teach me how to use it. Right now she knew more about the Shuttle than I did. I did not believe it would be hard to persuade her to help me. She hated her father as much as I did.

The thought of Merlin betrayed by his own daughter brought a smile to my face. Then the thought became sad and distressing. No family should fall to such a knavish fate.

At that point the planning and soldiering caught up with me. My body ached and my mind was numb with fatigue. Probably the drugged food also had something to do with my overall feeling of exhaustion. I bathed, soaking the aches and pains until my muscles went slack. One item that awed me: the griffin's wound had become a pale pink line! I healed at a fantastic rate, just as Peer said. I climbed from the tub, and when I finished toweling myself dry, I fell into bed with Thruvir at my side.

* * *

The Enion tapestry extended on the massive Shadowloom past the timbered roof into blackness. I felt its icy chill as though standing in front of an iceberg. Once more I lay my hand against the luminous weaving, and almost instantly, the fabric thawed and turned warm. I could feel my fingers sink into it as if descending into a warm sea. I willed myself to slip between the weave and enter the picture.

At that moment I heard a soft moan coming from somewhere high above me. At first I thought it might be from the tapestry itself, and alarmed, I stepped away. But the sound repeated

and issued from outside the room. In less time than it took for my heart to beat, I was standing once more on the Black Castle's ramparts. Below sprawled the city of factories, homes and people. The sky was a dusty orange-brown. The groans increased, and the scene wavered with every sigh and sob. In response, the castle shook as though from an earthquake. Gaps appeared in the stones' mortises. With a sharp, skirling sound, they began to pull apart. For a breath I stood transfixed; then I ran for the stairs and hurtled down the steps three at a time. The moaning grew louder. Behind me I heard the crack of stone, and the whole building shuddered. Debris rained down all around me and knocked me off my feet. Astonishingly, I was not killed. I looked about and saw sections of the Black Castle peel off onto the city below. I rushed for the tower, heart pounding, hoping to make the spiral stair that led to the weaving room below the tower. My only chance to escape the destruction was to enter the Enion tapestry.

I burst through the door and leapt down the twisting staircase. The tower crumbled, and each step disintegrated behind me. I made the narrow hallway one stride ahead of the tumbling stair and raced toward the gleam of light at the far end. A cloud of billowing smoke followed me down the corridor into the weaving room. At the landing I stopped, stupefied by what I saw. With each groan of the fortress, the stones heaved and the loom rocked violently. The pitching floor suddenly flung the Ixtlan Shuttle against the Enion tapestry and it sank out of sight. At the same time, the weaving began folding into itself and disappearing. I lunged for the tapestry but was too late. With a soft pop, Enion vanished.

The castle exploded, cascading black stone and burning embers around me. The loom toppled over, its massive timbers falling directly at me . . .

And I woke up, sweating . . . again; heart racing . . . again. For a moment I thought I was back in Macbeth's home on Thereon. Then I recognized my surroundings.

After several minutes, I got up and went into the bath and splashed water on my face. Looking into the mirror, I noticed the silver crescent tattoo pulsed vibrantly, echoing the nightmare's intensity.

It occurred to me that the castle in my dreams could be the burning wreckage I recalled when I first awakened in Thereon. I strained to dredge up some flotsam of memory that corresponded to it, but nothing surfaced.

Though sleep gnawed at me, the dream's images had me keyed up. I could think only of that peculiar chamber and the vibrant, detailed tapestry of Enion loaded onto the unearthly loom. I imagined myself stepping into the weaving and ending up here in happier times than now.

Sleep would not find me again any time soon, so I decided to walk and contemplate my circumstances. I dressed quickly, not bothering to change from the same clothes I had worn during the day's practice. I buckled Thruvir about my waist and loosened it in its scabbard. The slaver's knife I tucked into my boot. Over everything I threw a light cloak.

I filled my pipe, pipes being good for mulling things over, and drew it to light with a coal from the dying fire. Locking the door behind me, I headed for the palace's terraces. They were empty this time of night. Even so, I kept to shadows and walked softly, avoiding the guards. I didn't want anyone spotting me and interrupting my contemplation. And I didn't want any one blabbing to Adella or Peer about my midnight rambling. This need for secrecy—to come and go in Enion without anyone the wiser—was a part of my splintered past that, in spite of its devious insinuations, I was reluctant to abandon.

The air smelled pleasantly of forest and sea. Enion's moon appeared to lap at the waves, and in the east, a sapphire thread of sky along the timberline presaged the dawn. I walked

and drew the ganja deep into my lungs, letting smoke trickle out slowly. The night was fair for ruminating on dreams and secrets.

My thoughts turned toward castles. I shared Merlin's penchant for things medieval. In this thing he was correct in supposing we were alike. I relished Enion, though I recalled little about this world. Instead my head was stuffed with jumbled pictures of tall buildings, jumbo planes, and giant ships; my recollections consisted of wars and famines and killing machines that destroyed whole nations, of foul water and fouler air, of pestilence, and of the vast well of human indifference that made it all possible. While I did not desire these hateful things, something within me caused them to be embedded in my consciousness with a vivid familiarity.

Their presence made me wonder if the Lord Qweg of my past enjoyed the apocalyptic nature of such events. When he left Enion, did he seek them out to revel in the devastation they wrought? Perhaps that was what Queen Adella meant when she said I would hurt Enion if it suited me. If so, no wonder she shunned me and refused to let me share her bed.

But even as I might believe Qweg capable of unleashing an army against Enion without a qualm, I could not. I knew this in the way a man who looks into his soul, seeking his true self, knows his true enemy. I would die before I would let Enion be harmed in any way. And then I had a moment of clarity that caused me to falter and almost drop my meerschaum pipe: Adella let me stay, quite probably because through that starred eye of hers, she beheld the humanity eclipse the brutishness. She may need a beast like Qweg to fight an army of beasts, but she also recognized the hero part would hold Enion together. I sighed and my lips curled in a slight smile, not of cunning but acceptance. I vowed to be that hero, whether I shared her bed or not. Enion's bright existence burned in my blood as fiercely as any star, and I would allow no bad fortune, including my past, to tarnish her.

I resumed pacing, the night air cool against my forehead, the ganja buzzing in my brain with soft eloquence. I may have solved the mystery of why Della allowed me to stay here; still the question remained. Once my memories were restored, would I become the Lord Qweg that Della now hated, the man Peer tolerated only because he was the Queen's consort? At this moment, a part of me wanted my amnesia to remain permanent so that I would always have this feeling of love and wonderment for Enion, and more importantly, so that the possibility that Della and I would be reunited would be realized. But then I thought of Merlin and all the suffering he had caused me and Enion, and the violence that boiled within me demanded vengeance. For that I needed to uncover all my past in order to give me any edge to kill him.

By now, I had made one round of the palace, crossing from terrace to battlement and back again in a long loop. Mistelwood came into view a second time, the tips of its trees glowing red and orange like candles. The sea cupped the moon. True dawn was still a half hour away. The ganja had burned to ash, and errant thoughts of looms and grottoes tugged at my awareness without any comprehension of their meaning. I cleaned my pipe and tucked it into my belt. I allowed the pleasant thrum of the drug to take over my subconscious and guide my feet. Perhaps they would lead me to answers.

I found a stair descending to the courtyard. Most of the soldiers had returned to their barracks, except for a hardy few bedded down near the fires, their faces turned toward the waning stars. None of them noticed me. I entered the wide open doors of the palace. Guards immediately dropped to one knee. I nodded without saying a word. I went through the dining hall, ignoring the frescoed walls, ornate columns and beamed ceiling, and found myself following the gloomy dusty corridor Peer and I had passed by yesterday morning. At the other end, two guards saw me approach. They snapped to attention.

"At ease," I said. "How goes the watch?"

The older one relaxed. "Quietly, M'Lord. Hardly anyone passes this way, 'ceptin' yourself. And it's been a long time since you came here."

"How long do you reckon since I was last here?"

The guard shrugged. "Nearly two years. Right before you left unexpectedly. If you doan mind my sayin', it's surprising that you haven't been here already since you returned."

"Well, I'm back now."

"Right you are, M'Lord,"

I motioned him to move aside. He and the younger guard stepped away. I faced the door. An image from my dreams ran through my head . . . *I stood in front of a massive oak door, bound with brass and held up with wrought iron hinges. A brass lock held it closed. Taking a thin, flat key . . .*

Drawing the thong from around my neck, I fit the key into the brass lock. I heard two soft snicks as the notches and grooves slid into place. When I turned the key, the tumblers clicked back and I pulled the door open. Stepping inside, I pulled it closed behind me.

I stood on a platform above the now familiar, spiraling staircase. I won't bore you with repetitious detail. Simply put, I reprised the steps from my dream: descended the same dimly lit, winding stair, or its twin, crossed a similarly darkened corridor, and stood at the threshold of steps leading down into a fire-lit room.

In the room's center sat the loom, same as the other one even down to the massive dark timbers that made the frame, the ivory comb, and the tensioning wheel's diamond cogs. The heddles disappeared into the darkness of the beamed ceiling. Beside it stood a rack of spindles.

And then I was surprised. The tapestry hanging from the loom was not Enion, as I expected, but the spire and Black Castle of my dreams . . . nearly destroyed.

Chapter Eleven

The spire remained standing, but the castle was a gutted wreck. Only a solitary tower remained intact. From where I stood, I could make out four figures on a balcony next to its turret.

Interrupting my scrutiny, a reedy voice called out, "It took you long enough to get here."

A gnome-sized man, clothed in a tunic of ochre-colored, overlapping metal scales and burnished, yellow leather pants, limped out from behind the loom. He was hunchbacked and clubfooted; tiny pocks and warts marred a face partially hidden by a beard the color and texture of hammered copper; his nose was a grotesque tuber of flesh. He looked as though he just stepped from a fairy tale. Had he offered to spin straw into gold, I would not have been amazed.

The suspicious part of me said that no one should have been in this room but me. I freed Thruvir from its sheath and leveled its tip at the dwarf's heart.

"Who are you and how did you get into my private quarters?" I asked.

The dwarf ignored my questions. His gray-blue eyes flashing, he demanded, "Well, you've been gone for nearly two years. Did you get it?"

I walked down the stairs and closed with him until I towered over his diminutive form. Allowing anger to seep into my voice, I said, "Answer me."

His response took me aback. He giggled.

I placed Thruvir's edge along one ear.

"It would be a pity if circumstances forced me to worsen your hearing problem."

His defiance vanished, and his lips narrowed to a small sly line.

"Merlin would have already removed my ear."

I started.

"What do you know about Merlin?"

"Everything . . . Nothing."

"Which is it?" I asked.

If he had any fear, he certainly hid it well.

He laughed and answered, "About the brother, everything. About the Shadow Weaver, nothing."

"I don't like talking in riddles."

"That's a shame. The Sphinx fad is the latest thing in Enion. Perhaps you've heard this one going around: Why should Lord Qweg return after two years and act so strangely that some people are asking if he's lost his memory?"

His question startled me. Only Morgan knew about my amnesia. And she had vanished. I pressed the blade against his face.

He canted his head sideways until I thought his neck would snap. His eyes shifted to Thruvir.

"As you said, if you remove my ear, I won't hear your questions properly, and my answers won't be very clear."

I lifted my sword but left it hovering above his head.

He straightened.

"I'm Graymalkin," he said plainly.

"The weaver," I said, surprised. I had pictured a different sort of man.

"Shadow Weaver, if you please." He grimaced at me. "Show some respect. Without me none of this," he waved a bent and twisted hand around, "would exist."

I blinked. Morgan alleged otherwise.

"Impossible. I created Enion."

He pulled strands of corn-yellow hair back from his right eye. I stared at the same pulsing, silver and blue-tinged, crescent moon tattoo as my own.

"This says it's possible." Reason seemed to depart then, and he laughed at my puzzled frown until I thought he would choke.

I slapped him on the shoulder with the flat of my blade, as much to end his hysterics as to calm my own nerves at the finding of another family member.

"You have some explaining to do about Merlin and yourself," I said, my voice a low rasp.

His laughter went away, and once again in control of himself, he glared at me.

"*Pfaa*. I sent you out two years ago to retrieve the Ixtlan Shuttle. Instead, you come back without a past. I'd say you have some explaining to do yourself."

I calmed myself down. I needed answers, and I wasn't going to find them by killing him. I stepped back and resheathed my sword.

"Let's begin anew. How do you know about my memory loss?"

His eyes turned old and wise, and I had that fleeting feeling again, the same as when I first spied Morgan, that I knew this person in front of me.

He said, "When a son doesn't recognize his father, then amnesia is probably at the heart of

it."

I was too dumbfounded to speak right away. Finally I muttered a few imprecations, filled with the appropriate amount of skepticism, but ending with, "You're my father?"

He replied in a kind voice. "You don't remember me, do you? Memories all gone like they were burned out or something?"

I nodded weakly. The violent part of me receded to nothing.

He limped over to the fireplace and returned with a chair. Setting it down, he climbed onto the stool in front of the loom. His mismatched feet barely reached the treadles.

"Come, sit. Ask me what you want to know."

I sat heavily. Whenever I tried to get a handle on what he just told me, my thoughts turned to mush.

"Takes some getting used to, does it?" He laughed gleefully and slapped his hand against his thigh, his spirits once more playful. "You're probably worried now about what your own children will look like."

I still could not say anything. His mercurial temperament kept me off balance. I concentrated on his claim of parenthood. It didn't seem likely. Morgan never mentioned a grandparent. On the other hand, if what he said was true, I had a chance to rediscover my past or at least those portions in which he participated.

Graymalkin rattled on. "Not to worry. I didn't always look like this. I was tall and handsome like you, until Merlin stole the Ixtlan Shuttle and got it in his head to turn me into this comic creature, the Yellow Dwarf." His face darkened.

I asked automatically, "How did it happen?"

He grinned suddenly and cackled like the caricature he represented. He winced then, and with an effort, he modified his voice so it sounded less shrill. It seemed to take a great amount of willpower for him to stay emotionally stable for any lengthy period of time.

"The shorthand version is that I let you use the Ixtlan Shuttle to create Enion. Your brother found out and demanded that I allow him to make a Tapestry World for himself." His eyes lowered and he shook his head sadly. "Maybe it was all my fault, the way I raised him; but Merlin was very unstable, and I couldn't take the chance that once he became attuned to the Shuttle, he would abuse it. So, I refused his request. He became infuriated. Somehow he managed to steal the Ixtlan Shuttle and construct a Shadowloom. He changed my appearance and transported me to a reality of the Umbra so perverted and savage he must have thought I would never escape alive. I nearly didn't. I just managed to find my way out and make it to Enion."

"What happened next?" I asked, trying to fit all of this information into what little I recalled and what Morgan had told me.

"I sent you after the Shuttle, and it was a stalemate after that . . . except for the attacks on Enion."

The reference to Enion's threat gave me something to latch onto for balance. I put aside my wonderment at Graymalkin's announcement that he was my father and concentrated on finding out as much as I could from him. His tale indicated he did not know of the Shuttle's disappearance from Merilin's possession, and I decided to keep that information to myself for the time being.

"If Merlin controls the Shuttle, why is it a stalemate? He should have been able to weave a means to take Enion whenever he wanted."

Graymalkin's face cracked in a wide grin.

"He would need a Shadowloom for that." Graymalkin giggled as though this were a great joke.

"I don't understand."

"I demolished his loom when I pulled certain threads from his world's Tapestry." He pointed to the spindles where iridescent threads lay clustered like sheaves of moonglow. "There they rest. He can't do anything to us."

His eyes narrowed into tiny slits like a cat's and he asked, "Well, did you get the Shuttle?"

I shrugged.

"I don't know. Whatever happened to me two years ago is lost."

He frowned. The air seemed to go out of him and his head fell forlornly against his chest. For a long time he didn't say anything.

I was glad for the silence. I stood and looked around the room. The Black Castle tapestry caught my eye. I studied its charred ruins for a few moments before I made one of those leap of faith connections that blend memory, dreams and reality together.

"That's Tintagel, isn't it," I said matter-of-factly.

"Eh?" Graymalkin said, his head snapping up from his ruminations.

"The tapestry, it's of Tintagel on Earth."

"Yes." He remained subdued.

It fit the dream images I remembered: the pieces that had fallen onto the great city below and those that remained standing, blackened and wrecked. The vague misgivings that first stirred when Morgan mentioned this place returned. I had been inside its black stone walls.

But something didn't agree with Graymalkin's story. The answer lay in my nightmares of Tintagel's destruction. Of course, those dreams could just be phantasms of REM sleep or symbology torn from childhood events. Still, they possessed a vitality as though I had actually experienced the events at some point in my life.

"What are you leaving out of your story?" I asked bluntly.

"Nothing."

"You sent me after the shuttle."

He nodded vigorously.

And then I put it together.

"And while I was gone, you took out the threads causing Tintagel to fall down."

This time he nodded meekly.

"By the Devil, I was in the castle when you destroyed it! You nearly got me killed!" I roared.

"I waited," he squeaked.

"For how long?"

"A month . . . maybe a bit less. When you didn't return, I thought you were dead. I didn't have any choice. I had to protect myself."

With an effort, I calmed myself. After all, he had acted in self-preservation. I told myself that I would have done the same thing, or Qweg would have, which amounted to the same thing . . . maybe. At this moment, I found it hard to fathom what my reactions should be; my life, present and past, was all very confusing with no history to hang my feelings and responses on. And now, Graymalkin's claim to be my father wracked my emotions even more.

I tried to remember what happened while the castle fell around me.

I said, "Somebody pulled me from the wreckage and . . ."

Graymalkin's eyes glittered strangely, and I had the sense that he might already know

about this and was waiting to see how much I remembered.

". . . I passed out. I don't recall anything else."

Relief? . . . Satisfaction? . . . Disappointment? How do you read a dwarf's face? I certainly couldn't.

"A servant probably saved you," he said, dismissing the rescue.

"Or Merlin." I told him about Merlin's visit to Enion and recounted the note he left in my quarters. I left out the part about the missing Shuttle.

Graymalkin ran a gnarled finger across the weaving, leaving a tiny groove in the fabric's soft nap.

"It certainly could have been your brother, not that anyone would ever mistake his sense of irony for kindness."

Once more I cursed the precision of this memory loss—how I could remember fleeting bits and pieces of a thing but not its entirety.

"Curious, in his note my brother never mentioned our father or that you were here."

"Why should he? He thinks I'm dead or still lost in the Umbra."

"Convenient for you."

He giggled.

"Why do you think I sent you to Tintagel? As long as he thinks I'm out of the picture, we've got an ace in the hole."

"We have more than that." And I told him the rest of Merlin's note and the fact that the Shuttle was up for grabs.

Clapping his hands, he cackled gleefully. Just as quickly, his jaundiced face darkened to ochre, and he once more became serious.

"Now we have a chance," he continued earnestly. "Once we recover the Shuttle, I can reweave myself as I used to be, return everything to its former state; and . . ." he giggled loudly, not bothering to restrain his elation, "…and turn Merlin into a toad."

Then his eyes flattened, his face became solemn and he paused, for what I thought dramatic effect. "I might even be able to restore your memories."

My body jerked in surprise. I couldn't stop myself.

"Is that possible?" I rasped, my voice tight.

He looked at me sympathetically.

"It might be."

My past restored . . . My knees trembled, and I gripped the back of the chair to keep from falling. My breath caught in my throat, and my palms grew moist. All the overused metaphors of drowning and thirsty men could not have begun to describe the euphoria that shot through me in that moment, or how the hope threw all my thoughts into a whirlwind of desire.

Graymalkin's gray-blue eyes narrowed to tiny black dots. I could feel them pressing on me, demanding an answer to his unspoken question. I forced myself to turn away from him so that I could think.

But thought became an abstraction. Since I entered this room, information fell in bits, like portions of fractals from a Jackson Pollock canvas, too few for me to fathom the pattern they formed. Added to them were fleeting images from the Earth Tapestry—history, places, and events from a world I don't ever remember seeing—and the realm where I now stood, which I recalled in the marrow of my being but could not remember the details of its history or my part in it. I needed to think on this information for a while, turn and flip the fragments to see if some way of arranging them made sense. But I had no painting to match them to, and I was as

helpless as a blind man describing a camel to another blind man.

Graymalkin interrupted the chaos of my thoughts. "If you don't have the Shuttle and Merlin doesn't either . . . I wonder . . . perhaps you managed to steal it and hide it before you were captured. With your memories gone, you don't know where you stashed it."

I nodded vaguely, but I didn't really hear him. I was staring at Tintagel's single tower and the four figures. Three men and one woman stood on the balcony of the solitary remaining tower. The woman's red hair fell in tangled curls about a heart-shaped face, down her back almost to her hips. Her eyes were the color of smoke with a hint of green fire in them. She shimmered in a pale lavender evening dress of carbonated silk that plunged deeply in front and showed off her wasp-waisted figure through the sensuous clinging of the fabric.

Her image reminded me of something Marilyn Monroe—another name from my forgotten self—told a group of entertainment reporters: "The only thing harder than getting a woman out of an evening gown is getting her into it in the first place." She could have been Morgan, twenty years older and wearier, and I thought perhaps they were related like mother and daughter.

The two younger men were alike, with tawny curled hair that fell just above their shirt collars and eyes the color of mist in sunlight. They wore light blue, silk tuxedos. Even through the material their physiques were strong and massive. The one beside the woman could have been her twin.

The older looking man, who stood closest to the balcony's crenelated wall, was dressed casually in a ruffled gray shirt and dark blue leggings. An indigo cloak, tied at the neck, swept behind him. Threads of silver writhed within the fabric as though a soft breeze perpetually ruffled his clothing, marking him as favored of the Gods. Something familiar about him grabbed my attention and I peered at him closely. The flickering light of the fire made it difficult to examine him.

Then I saw him clearly.

Thruvir came alive in my hands. I whipped the blade and stopped it a hair's breadth from Graymalkin's neck.

"You're lying!" I hissed. I rested the tip against the folds of flesh in his throat. "This is all pretense. A play for my benefit. Who the hell are you? And what do you really want?"

He didn't blink, but said in a steady voice, "Everything I have told you so far is the truth."

I pointed to myself on the tower.

"Why am I in the Earth Tapestry?"

For a moment a look of astonishment overcame his face. Then he leaned back and roared with laughter. In the same moment, with a careless motion, he batted my sword aside.

"Of course," he said trying to contain himself, "you don't remember. That's Merlin. You and he . . . you're twins." He continued laughing as though the joke were on me.

Twins! I let the sword drop. I leaned forward and studied the image. The vibrant colors of the mist-like threads made the detail vivid. Maybe the play of the firelight fluttering over the weaving's nap distorted Merlin's face slightly, but I didn't believe anyone could have told us apart.

It seemed strange that Morgan did not tell me we were twins. Perhaps, having never seen me in person and with the mustachios I had when we met, she couldn't see the resemblance. Probably the oversight was just coincidence. But an event from that past part of me that had nothing to do with Enion surfaced from the darkened portions of my memory. A man named Carl Jung and I shared a train compartment from Bern to Geneva in a country called Switzerland. During the entire ride I listened carefully as he explained a new theory of his. He believed in

a kind of coincidence of nature he called synchronicity, in which events happened for reasons beyond the intrigues of men. I didn't believe him then, and I wasn't about to begin believing him now. A man who trusts that coincidences are the accidental circumstances of a benign universe lives a very short life.

But I didn't say any of that to the dwarf. Instead I was thinking that first Graymalkin claimed to be my father; then, moments later, he held out the chance to recover my past. Both statements very nearly overwhelmed me. Luckily, each time something brought me back to stability. The result was that I could not shake the feeling Enion and I were pawns in a game with a prize greater than I could dream.

I put Thruvir away. I stood a moment, thoughts running in circles, chasing their own tails. Too many things about Graymalkin's story didn't match up with Morgan's; too many odd references from my jangled mind made me wonder whose Tapestry World belonged to whom. But fatigue crept up on me with a heavy tread, and since I still had other questions to ask, I didn't waste any time trying to figure it out.

"Who are the others in the tapestry with him?"

"Morgan and Macbeth are on his right. They're also twins. They have as much reason to hate him as you do. He exiled them on Thereon, many years ago. Though I don't know if that means you can trust them."

The people in the tapestry did not look like the two I met in Thereon. But Merlin probably transfigured them as he did Graymalkin. A violet patch had covered Macbeth's right eye, so I don't know if he had a tattoo or not. Morgan had not mentioned any blood relationship with Macbeth. In fact, she had gone out of her way to say they were not related. The most likely explanation, given what I had learned so far, was that she was operating independently as she claimed Macbeth was doing. It seemed machinations and intrigues ran deep in our family.

"And the young man on his left?" I asked.

Graymalkin blanched and then laughed uncontrollably. The lunacy of his character seemed to overcome him. In the next instant, he straightened and drew in a deep breath. "Gareth," he sputtered in a rush, and he almost collapsed as if saying the name had taken all his strength.

I felt sorry for him, trapped in a mind and body he was unable to control for any length of time.

"He's the youngest," Graymalkin continued after he regained control of himself. "I don't know what happened to him. But given Merlin's filial tendencies, most likely he marooned the lad on a perverted Tapestry World somewhere after altering his appearance."

"Do all of your children and grandchildren have this tattoo?"

"Only those who have passed through a gate into the Umbra or through a tapestry. The passage is like a rebirthing. It marks you in this manner."

"You still haven't answered my first question. How did you get into this room?"

"When I first arrived here, you were gone. Queen Adella and Peer found me in Mistelwood, more dead than alive, and took me in. When the Queen discovered I was a Shadow Weaver, she ordered a key made for me. Shortly after that, you returned briefly. We came up with a plan to recover the Shuttle, and you left again."

"The guards at the top of the stairs never mentioned you."

He laughed and winked exaggeratedly.

"Nobody knows I'm here other than yourself, Peer, and Adella. I stay in these chambers to protect the loom."

"How many keys to this room?"

"Three that I know of. Yours and mine, and Merlin has one. They open the doors to all the Shadowloom halls in all the Tapestry worlds. But only two authentic Shadowlooms exist. The others are phonies."

This information surprised me.

"Why construct a phony Shadowloom?"

"I thought that if one of my children ever gained control of the Ixtlan Shuttle, they might waste their efforts on a spurious weaving, allowing me time to reclaim the Shuttle before they did any real harm."

I smiled. "Your ploy didn't work."

He nodded his head sadly.

I stared at the Shadowloom. I had no doubts as to its authenticity. The timbers throbbed with energy like the heart of a living beast. Watching it, I experienced a resonance similar to quantum particles in a bound state. We were old lovers. I didn't know what it meant, except that there was more to Graymalkin's story than he let on.

I was sorely tempted by the power the loom held out to whomever controlled the Ixtlan Shuttle. With the two, a Shadow Weaver could create whatever he imagined. Whole universes with their own physical and moral laws would exist as extensions of the weaver's persona. I thought then of Thereon and the perversion that must blacken Merlin's soul. I swallowed hard and wondered if any man would be twisted by such power to create unspeakable realities to punish others. At that moment, a bit of the violent rage I kept under wraps seeped out. I reveled in the thought that given the chance, I would scourge Merlin for what he had done to me, not to mention Morgan and Graymalkin. The ease with which this savageness came upon me disturbed me greatly. I thought perhaps lack of sleep might have allowed it to surface so easily. But it slipped upon me like an old garment, well worn and comfortable. In the future I would have to make certain I did not wear it casually and easily.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the dwarf staring at me. Storm clouded his gray-blue eyes. "We have to concentrate on finding the Shuttle," he urged.

I quelled my anger and slammed it back into its compartment, telling myself that if I gained the upper hand in my struggle against Merlin, I would not allow my temper to influence my retaliation.

"We will, but not tonight," I said wearily.

He muttered a paroxysm of four letter words, never repeating himself.

When he finished, I asked, "Why didn't Merlin kill you? It would have been simpler."

He laughed loudly and his anger sloughed away as quickly as it appeared.

"Smarter too," Graymalkin agreed. "But vanity stopped him. He wanted to see me suffer as a misshapen dwarf."

"All of this because you would not allow him to make his own world."

"Merlin is a twisted creature, unbalanced from the beginning of his life. I couldn't let him weave his warped and bent psyche into a world." He licked his lips and frowned. "He was never a true son, the way you have been."

I bowed. The compliment sounded hollow, as compliments do when you're not certain about the source. I turned and headed toward the stairway. I had learned enough for one night.

"You can't leave now!" he shouted after me.

"And yet I am," I called out over my shoulder.

"We have to plot a way to find that Shuttle."

"We will."

"When?" he demanded.

I stopped with my foot on the first stair. Turning, I smiled at him. "I'm disappointed that the father who possesses the imagination to create dozens of worlds is so limited in his grasp of the present."

He glared at me.

"If Merlin recovers the Shuttle before we do, he will smash us."

"Merlin has no idea where it is. More importantly, the key to its whereabouts is locked in my head. As long as I'm alive and safe, we'll get to it first."

"How do you know that?"

"I know it." I did too, though not the how or why of it. It was more than snatches of memory or bits and pieces of visions from my past. Standing next to that loom, I was certain that the affinity I sensed for it extended to the Ixtlan Shuttle. I was attuned to both of them.

"We must find it quickly!" he shouted.

"We will," I promised. Though I really meant that I would find it. Afterwards, I would decide what to do with it.

"When is that?" he demanded.

"When I have considered everything you've told me."

I turned away and climbed the stair. Partway up I heard a muffled thump, and then, Graymalkin's howls filled the chamber. I turned back and saw him hopping on one foot, holding the deformed one in his hands. The grimace on his face was unworldly, and I thought for a moment he would rip himself apart in his anger.

I chuckled. Even if Graymalkin really was my father, Merlin had done a superb job in reweaving him as a buffoon straight from a fairy tale.

I mounted the steps and left the weaving room, headed for my quarters.

Chapter Twelve

I still needed that thousand hours of sleep, but Enion's sun was already sending fluted rays of pink and silver through the dining hall's jewel-pane windows. I changed course and headed for the kitchen.

The drudges bowed and scraped and generally got in my way, asking what they could do for me. By the third repetition, I banished them with a scowl.

I found coffee and water and brewed a large pot. I constructed a couple of sandwiches, Dagwood style, with mustard and pickles. I took everything to the dining hall where I ate alone at the long banquet table made from darkly whorled smokewood.

I had just filled my sixth cup of coffee and was feeling as alert as caffeine makes one, when Della walked in. She looked immaculate. Her rainbow hair flashed in the morning light. Somehow she managed to smile and glare at me at the same time.

"I was just leaving," I said and stood up.

"No need. I sent Peer to find you. I'm calling my advisors together."

"Another Council meeting?" I frowned. "I have a better idea. Why not keep Peer and Parsifal, trade the others in for a horse and shoot the horse."

"How original," she said witheringly.

"It's the best I can do on coffee," I replied, trying to make light of it.

"Those Councilors you dismiss so easily have kept Enion from being overrun for the last year."

I snorted, thought of a dozen things about their ancestry, had time to let it go, then change my mind, regret my indiscretion in advance, and say what I thought anyway.

"Perhaps Peer and Parsifal have. The rest of that effete bunch couldn't take on a troop of Campfire girls."

"Maybe; I don't know what Campfire girls are or what they're capable of. The point is the peasants from their estates can fight, and that is what those Councilors have given me and Enion-men and women who fight and win . . . which is more than you have done in the last year."

Remember when I said that Peer was one of the two people in Enion who could chastise me? Adella was the other. She was right, of course. In all things Enion came first.

"Point scored." I grinned at her.

She remained the image of stone, as hard as the walls that surrounded us.

My smile faded, and I spoke in all earnestness, because everything with me is a hundred and ten percent—love, anger . . . contrition.

"I'll make you a deal. I will find Merlin Skye and kill him, ending this war."

"Or?"

"Or you will have your freedom. I will no longer be your consort, and you will be free to marry whomever you please."

Long tipped fingers went to her mouth. And I thought maybe a tear veiled the star in her left eye. And then she was all frost and stone again.

"You swear this?"

"I swear it."

"And if you break your oath?" Her breath caught the tiniest bit in her throat.

"Peer can take my life." I meant it too. Everything is a hundred and ten percent.

A heavy tramp and Peer appeared behind her. By the look on his face he had overheard our exchange.

"Is that what you desire, my Queen?" he asked.

Her lips trembled, and a small sound like a fluttering bird came out of her mouth.

I said, "It's what I want."

Peer looked at Della. For a fleeting second her face softened, and that star shimmered. Then she nodded her head once and looked away.

"As my Queen wishes," Peer intoned. He gave me a worried frown, his tangled hair and dark beard making his massive features prophet-like. "I pray you do not fail."

I was still holding my coffee cup and I noticed gratifyingly that my hand did not shake.

A moment of silence and then Peer whispered something to her. She nodded and he left.

Della said, "A Forester just arrived. Artemis is on her way here to report." She paused, the star in her eye no longer veiled but glittering fiercely. "Another beast army is gathering."

* * *

It took most of the day to get Enion's army assembled. I managed to avoid the Council by reviewing the troops and discussing strategies with my Captains, all of which left me only enough time for more coffee and a couple of catnaps. The attack fretted me, not only because

of the threat to Enion, but because it meant I would have to delay finding the Shuttle and uncovering my past. It also increased Merlin's lead in the search.

At the end of the afternoon, I changed into battle gear and descended the steps into the great entrance hall where Adella already waited in lengthening shadows, watching the throng of troops in the courtyard—almost two thousand men and women, wearing chain mail and helmets, dripping gold in the dying sun, and armed with swords and shields. Pennons bearing Enion's colors, a blue and silver crescent on a field of gold, fluttered from several lances.

Scar-faced Gawain stood with the other Captains, his huge bulk dwarfing everyone but Peer. Parsifal leaned against his horse. He smoked a long stemmed pipe and watched the gathering with a reflective air. The soldiers, clustered in squads, were subdued. They looked at the ground or spoke in whispers to one another. All were veterans and knew the relentless foe they faced would not be defeated easily. Peer passed among them. Everywhere he went spirits rose and impromptu shouts broke the stillness.

At that moment, Adella passed through the great arched doors of the palace. The raw shouts turned to thunderous cheers for Enion's Queen. I hung back. The glory was rightfully hers, and it gave me a chance to look for my daughter.

Our paths had not yet crossed. Artemis had arrived some time in the early afternoon and reported immediately to Council. I was curious to see her, for I did not remember her at all the way I recalled images and stories of Peer and Adella. I also wondered how much she knew about my life as Qweg and whether she possessed the same talents that I did.

I spotted a group of tall, lithe Vale Foresters, standing aloof near the massive gates in the palace wall. They were clad in the misty colors of Mistelwood—light greens and browns and autumn yellows and reds. Pale, sun-silver hair, which flowed like molten starlight past their shoulders, and slightly pointed ears reminded me of elven myths. Each one carried a compound bow of Artemis's design and a full quiver of steel-shafted arrows. A thin, short sword, fashioned from what looked like crystal, was slipped through a belt at the small of the back.

The group shifted as Adella descended into the courtyard, and I spotted within their ranks a young woman whom I knew immediately was Artemis. The same jeweled hair as her mother cascaded down her back in a rippling rainbow cataract. She was the woman standing behind Della and Peer in the tapestry of my dreams. As I went out onto the wide curving steps of the palace, she glanced in my direction and started in surprise. One hand went to the sword at her waist and she studied me with a fierce glare.

I sighed and thought that everyone in Enion *did* despise Qweg.

Adella reached the courtyard below and drew her sword. It was different than the one she greeted me with two days ago. I recognized the intricately carved guard and the archaic runes etched into its silver-steel and knew it to be Thruvir's sister blade, Vajra. It held all the power of the Umbra's chaos as mine did. No flesh could stand against it. All knelt before her, even the Vale Foresters who seemed disinclined to bow to anyone.

"Victory!" she cried, raising the sword high above her head.

The throng rose in response, drew their weapons in a single motion, and shouted, "Victory!"

Horses appeared instantly for Della and me. We mounted and led the entire company to meet the enemy.

* * *

We traveled into the night, deep into Mistelwood toward a narrow valley where Artemis described the beast army encamped. The ride was uneventful except for one incident: Artemis rode up next to me.

Peer was on my other side and Della just beyond him. When he saw my daughter, he eased his great roan back a few paces. Della went with him.

Artemis dropped the reins and guided her pony by her knees with the surety of a hunter. Her bow slung across her saddle's pommel within easy reach. She wore the same forest colors as the Vale Foresters. The horses she and her troop used were smaller than those of our soldiers, being more like ponies. I didn't doubt for a moment that the Foresters could ride circles around our chargers, shooting their bows with deadly accuracy the entire time.

Her narrow elfin face never stayed in one position very long, always flicking glances at the night-limned ridgelines as we rode along. The moon glided a glacial path above us.

Artemis's gaze was as chilly as the moon. She looked even more like her mother up close, except for her eyes—flakes of granite on malachite and no star. They had that old familiarity in them that runs in families and told me with a certainty, in spite of my lack of remembrance of her, that she was my daughter.

"Mother told me of your understanding," she said coldly. "Do you mean it?"

"That is between your mother and me." I saw her stiffen, and her hand moved imperceptibly toward her bow. "But, yes, I mean it."

She relaxed.

"Good."

She said nothing for a few dozen flicks of our horses' tails. Then her hand went casually to her short blade and rested on its bone grip.

"I swore the last time you left, that when you returned, I would cut you for every tear she shed because of you."

"That would probably kill me."

"That was the idea."

"And now?"

"Mother seems to think you will keep your word."

"Ahh, but you aren't certain."

"I don't know. That left eye of hers sees things at odd angles. Maybe there is a difference in you."

"There is . . . I'm not the man I was."

She nodded slowly. "Perhaps. But if you don't keep your vow, I will keep mine."

"Fair enough." I chuckled. "Though you'll have to stand in line after Peer."

Her thin lips curled in a slight smile. And then the truly odd thing happened. She brushed back her hair with long, tapered, fragile-looking fingers in an almost studied gesture. It was a good thing I had reins to hold on to, for beside her right eye pulsed the crescent moon tattoo.

Twice in twenty-four hours. By now I should have gotten used to running into members of my family who displayed that mark, but still it shook me up.

"How did you get that tattoo?" I asked, when I recovered from my astonishment.

"A few months back, a Forester and I trailed a wounded beast into a cave on Tirach Mir. A thick mist, obliterating all sight and sound, filled the cavern just inside the entrance. We passed through it and on the other side encountered a flat featureless plain. The sun glowed a lustrous disk of green haze." She hesitated, studied the landscape a few moments as we rode through it. "I felt strange in that environment, scared but comfortable at the same time, as though I knew it

somehow."

"And the Forester?" I asked to give myself time to think.

She shook her head.

"He turned into a delicate mist like the color drained out of him. We hurried back through the fog, but by the time I set foot back on Tirach Mir, he had vanished. Days later I saw this brand while I sat in front of a mirror, combing my hair."

She was marked just like Graymalkin said. There was no doubt she was my daughter.

"Could you find it again? This cave entrance?"

She gazed at me for a few heartbeats.

"I suppose I could. Is it important?"

I could have evaded her question, but I thought she would see through that ploy.

"It's part of the family legacy. It's a special gate that leads to the Umbra, a place of fantastical realities."

A slender finger traced the tattoo.

"And this?"

"That tattoo signifies that you are a part of a select group which has power over the Umbra. It means you can leave Enion whenever you choose and visit other worlds."

Silence. Then, "Will you show me how to use this power?"

"If you wish, though I must warn you, the Umbra is a violent and dangerous place."

She nodded her head slowly, as if I had just confirmed what she already suspected. She watched the skyline for a long while, and I could almost hear desire and duty arguing within her. When she looked at me again, the cold anger that had existed toward me just beneath the surface of her eyes had been replaced with a kind of understanding.

"I don't think any of us should leave Enion while the beast army continues to invade us," she said quietly.

"Agreed. But when this battle is over, will you take me to the cave?"

"Why?"

"I believe it may be the only way to stop these attacks permanently."

My response wasn't entirely false. The cave was the only means to reach the Umbra from Enion; and I had a vague plan that if I could not find the Ixtlan Shuttle, I would raise within the Umbra's infinite realities an army to attack Tintagel. But my overarching desire to find the gate hinged on my encounter with Graymalkin. I sensed the cave and the Shuttle were somehow linked. Finding one might mean finding the other. With the Shuttle I hoped to restore my memories as Graymalkin suggested. Once more whole in mind and body, I would be able stop Merlin permanently.

Whether Artemis believed my motives altruistic or not, I didn't find out. At that moment, moonlight glinted from a mirrored surface on a hill ahead of us. She saw it and returned the coded flashes with her short sword.

"Will you take me to the cave?" I asked again, when she resheathed her blade.

"I'll think about it."

She spurred her pony toward the code source.

Adella, Peer, myself and our Captains topped the hill a few minutes later. A patrol waited for us—the same sun-silvered hair and pointed ears as the Vale Foresters who rode alongside Enion's soldiers. The scouts spoke in muffled voices that sounded like whispers of wind. They told of the beast army's encampment in a valley less than a league to the west; no sentries or outriders were posted. Their forces numbered nearly a thousand.

I called our Captains and briefed them. The plan was simple. Our archers and Artemis' Foresters would slip through the woods and surround the creatures, forming a horseshoe. Parsifal would take three squads of soldiers with pikes to reinforce them. When they were in position, the rest of us would attack and close the trap.

We proceeded to a hill overlooking the enemy. By now the moon had slid well past the peak of Tirach Mir on its way to the sea. Its frosty whiteness illuminated the beast camp. They were everything Peer described and all the things of hell I imagined—monsters out of legend and myth, misshapen creatures that no human mind ever imagined, deformed men whose grotesqueries of limb and face distorted any hint of humanity. Scores of gargoyles, like the chiseled, stone pair Morgan and I passed on the Umbra's blistering sands, strode heavily among the beasts, forming them into squads like some feral army. Growls, screeches, and roars rended the night, making the air even more chilly than the moon's crystalline light.

And yet, no single soldier viewing that macabre menagerie lacked the heart to attack and destroy the enemy that threatened Enion.

Della pulled her rapier from its scabbard in a slow sparking hiss. Peer had outfitted himself with a great battleaxe. He twirled it easily in his hands. Behind them, the Captains had already freed their weapons, and beneath their helms, the moon revealed determined expressions.

As a military commander, I feared the terrain more than the beast army. The valley formed a narrow defile and presented a formidable place to assault on horseback. Perhaps that was why the enemy posted no lookouts; it would be difficult and near disastrous for an attacking force, bunched and confined in small cavalry groups, to charge into that corridor. But we had no option. Once they left this area, the beasts would be harder to contain.

The sun would not clear the ridgeline for another couple of hours. I decided not to delay. The troops, warmed by the march, were ready. I was in no condition to go into battle, sleepless now for two nights. But like my army, I had no other choice even had I entertained the notion of staying behind.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I swiveled and saw Adella staring at me. I wondered if she was silently asking me if I would keep my promise and defend Enion to the death. I knew the proper reply without having to search my heart or soul for the answer. Watching that beastial mass below us, frenzy surged just beneath the surface and I smiled, knowing I would enjoy this night of killing.

I called Gawain over and commanded that he and a squad stay close to the Queen at all times. Adella stiffened at my orders but did not challenge them. Gawain saluted and grinned, the scars in his face rippling with pleasure at his assignment.

I saluted my Queen, then adjusted my helmet to protect my eyes and head. I stood tall in my saddle so that all the company could see me. I drew my sword. I leaned forward, pointing Thruvir at the valley below. We charged.

* * *

The enemy flapped, hopped, slithered, and lumbered to meet us with fang and claw. We answered with blade and lance. Just before the two forces met, our archers sprang from their hiding places and ripped into the beasts with enfilading fire.

A giant wyvern in front of me snapped a rider in his jaws, shook him, and tossed the bloody legs aside. Three arrows caught it in the throat. Another pierced its eye. It screamed and

fell, crushing a hydra and a manticore.

The beasts growled, screeched, and roared as we drove upon them. Their front lines hung a moment like a giant wave, undecided what to do against our onslaught, then turned and crashed, a tsunami of flesh, into other beasts. Archers poured volley after volley of death from both sides.

We smashed through them.

A pair of gargoyles flew at me, fangs bared and talons extended. I cleaved one's wing and the creature crashed to the ground and remained still. A back stroke decapitated the other, and it slammed headless into a griffin. More gargoyles attacked, but their stone flesh was as cotton candy to Thruvir's enchanted blade.

On my right, Peer's battle ax shattered limbs and crushed skulls, hewing great gaps in the enemy's forces. A unicorn charged him. He severed its spine, threw its lifeless body into a phalanx of centaurs, and fell upon them like a whirlwind. I glimpsed Adella separate a gorgon's head from its body; its black snakes writhed in death. Her horse trampled a faceless man with tentacles for arms. Then the maelstrom of battle swept me away from her.

The violent part of me freed itself completely. I plunged forward, heedless of the danger of being cut off. A hundred men followed me. Thruvir slashed a pathway of destruction. I swung and swung until my right arm wearied, then I switched and used my left. In my wake, a hundred of the beasts lay dead or dying.

I don't know how long I had been fighting like a berserker when an area of quiet settled around me. The enemy gathered too far away for me to strike, and my own men struggled to catch up with me. Black and red blood smeared the grass and turned the ground muddy and slippery. Mounds of monstrous flesh dotted the clearing. Many humans lay still beside them. The smell of death lingered everywhere.

My followers and I were strung out far ahead of Enion's main army. The beasts unexpectedly reformed and launched a counterattack on my troop's flank. They almost turned us, but Parsifal's men swept out of the trees and cut them down.

By now my mount was gone and so were those of my men. Parsifal's soldiers were also dismounted. We combined forces and hacked and chopped our way forward on foot. But the beasts' defense was stiffening. I looked around the battlefield and saw gargoyles directing the monsters in effective counterattacks. I noticed too many of our soldiers were dying for each one of theirs. We would be wiped out unless something was done to stop those stone beasts.

Then I saw it—a giant winged gargoyle commanding the beast forces from a domed rock at the back of their camp. Arrows whizzed in the moonglow all around it, but none came near, as though some sorcerous spell protected it. I knew that thing was the real power of the beast army. To kill the leader was to win the battle.

I called my force together. About fifty of us remained, and all were wounded to some degree. "Get me to that rock!" I shouted.

They redoubled their efforts. We waded through the beasts. Thruvir took the head from a griffin and sliced through the spine of a manticore that lunged at Parsifal. Writhing, its scorpion tail speared a woman before it lay still. We fought and killed and were killed.

In all, twenty of us made it to the base of the dome.

I pointed to the gargoyle leader and yelled at Parsifal, "Guard my back! I'm going after it!"

He grinned without humor. "You're safe as long as I draw breath."

He impaled a creature that may once have been a man, kicked his blade free and slashed the head from another. Blood spouted. "Take him!" he shouted, and threw himself against the

creatures that beset us.

The rock formed a natural set of steps to the top. I ran up them and gained the height.

The gargoyle turned a massive smooth head toward me. Scarlet eyes, deep set beneath ridges of stone, glared at me; it bared yellowed fangs as long as a dire wolf's. Unnaturally long arms carried two short swords with blazing runes along the fortes. It furled its great wings and advanced toward me.

"Foolish human," it growled.

I raised my visor and our eyes met.

"Remember me?" I asked.

"I see only a man who has come too far and will die by my hand this dawn."

So much for it mistaking me for my twin brother Merlin.

"So I guess a truce is out of the question?"

It laughed, a low, barking snarl.

"This evening I will eat your entrails. Later I will wear your bones around my neck like a talisman."

"Sticks and stones," I replied. But possibility lay behind his boast. Caffeine and adrenaline had long since worn off, and I was bone weary beyond even what berserk rage can evoke.

It advanced, the blades slicing the air like scythes. I stepped back, parried, and slashed at its head. It stepped out of the way, not even using its swords to block. Maybe it knew that Thruvir could shatter any blade. I rushed it, and a wing unfurled and swept the ground, tripping me. I curled into a ball and came up on my feet. But the gargoyle was already lunging. This time its long arms whirled the rune swords in windmill fashion. I parried, and it beat me back two paces. I retreated onto a ledge that was a half circle of rock too small to back around. It pressed me slowly toward the edge.

I'm stronger than most men, but in the last four days I had had no true rest. My body now ached with fatigue. A long fight with this creature and it would be the victor. So I tried a desperate maneuver and cast Thruvir at it like a javelin. The blade whistled through the air.

The gargoyle brought both its swords down to guard, but Thruvir beat them out of its hands and pierced the beast's stony chest. It roared in pain, and a great split appeared in its sternum. Detritus dribbled from wounds front and back.

It staggered, and I leapt for my blade, to draw and hack its head from its shoulders. But a wing snapped forward and caught the edge of my visor, stunning me. Another blow ripped the helm from my head. The gargoyle drew me close with its talons.

"I have no heart," the beast hissed.

Stone fists battered me like sledge hammers. I reeled backwards. A backhanded strike slammed me to the rock, knocking the wind out of me. I tried to move, but my legs would not respond; my breath came as painful swipes of air into my lungs. I watched helplessly as the gargoyle slowly drew Thruvir from its body with both long arms.

It straddled me triumphantly. With a roar, it thrust the point at my throat. I twisted my head aside and the blade shattered the rock beside my ear. Stone fragments sliced into my cheek.

Feeling returned to my legs as it raised Thruvir again. I kicked, catching the creature in the crotch and lifting it several feet in the air. The sword whistled harmlessly above me.

I lunged upward. My hands groped for the gargoyle's neck, and I squeezed. It struck me once in the head with the haft. Sparks exploded behind my eyes, but I buried my head in my shoulder and twisted with all my remaining might. I couldn't tell if I had any effect against that thick throat when a great shudder swept through its body. Like water freezing all at once, its

flesh flashed cold and solid beneath my fingers. I let go, and the gargoyle, now rigid, fell like a statue. It struck the rock and its arm shattered. Thruvir spun free, glimmering in the sun that now peeked a scarlet sliver on the horizon.

My ribs hurt and every muscle in my body was sore from the beating. A half a dozen cuts and slashes soaked red through my clothes. But the battle still raged, so I picked up Thruvir, took ten steps, groaned and collapsed.

. . . to be continued next month

Mark Reeder currently works for Centre Communications as a writer researcher for educational videos. His short fiction has been published on the web at Deep Magic, Quantum Muse, and Dark Planet. The science fiction fantasy novel, "A Dark Knight for the King," co-authored by Ron Meyer, is available from Publish America as a POD through Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.com. He has a Master's degree in history from the University of Cincinnati and has studied the martial arts for thirty years. Mark lives in Boulder, Colorado.

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